

Halo: Vanguard

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Summary: 10 years have passed since the Human-Covenant war ended, but remnants of the fallen empire still threaten the galaxy. When humanity is thrust into a war that threatens to consume the universe in a burning cataclysm, the Spartans of Honor Team must rise to lift them from the ashes of annihilation.

1. I: Origins

Halo: Vanguard

Section One: Honor Three

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><p>Chapter I: Origins

_ "Honor is not earned; it is born in the hearts of heroes." _

July 3, 2544 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System.

Darkness; I always hated it. No matter where I turned, no matter where I looked, it was always there. Enveloping me. Suffocating me.

I began to panic, my mind racing and trying to justify my sudden lack of vision. My brain was burning with pain, and I quickly realized that I had been unconscious at some point.

I could hear muffled shouts and voices around me as I was shoved forward, my fragile feet struggling to keep up. My breath came out as quick gasps as I tried to keep up with the pace and remain conscious at the same time. I was barefoot and the cold, stone floor sent chills up my body. I was cold and tired, a good sign that it was probably well into the night. Fear gripped my heart like a sword as

the shoving became fiercer and the shouting came to its crescendo.

"That's far enough! Take off the bag and get him ready!" yelled a rasping voice close to my ear. My head exploded with fiery pain as a hand grasped me and ripped off the bag obscuring my vision. A flash of blinding light rushed into my retinas, and I cried out in shock in pain. After a few seconds of mind numbing pain, I opened my eyes.

I was standing in the center of a circular pit, with concrete walls trapping me inside. The floor was made of rough sand that scratched my feet and made them itch. Hanging lights brightened the arena, and droplets of water fell from cracks in the ceiling. At least a hundred men in gray armor sat in rows above the arena, shouting and cursing with eyes burning with murderous animosity.

I looked ahead of me and saw another boy my age, standing on the other side of the arena. He was barely seven, with innocent green eyes and a mane of brown, tattered hair. He wore nothing except for a pair of Skivvies and strips of rough cloth wrapped around his knuckles. He looked scared out of his wits, like me, and was glancing at the soldiers shouting insults at him from above.

A soldier grabbed my hands and wrapped a scratchy, thick cloth around them, just like the other boy. When he was finished, he chuckled and gave me a hard pat on the back.

"Good luck, bastard." He spoke as he grinned and left the arena through a barred door far behind me, slamming it shut. Only the green eyed boy and I were left in the pit.

Suddenly the green eyed boy roared and charged at me, tears in his eyes and fists at his side. He was upon me in seconds, connecting his left fist with my cheek. I was sent crashing to the floor as I cried out in pain and shock. Without hesitation he was on me again, fists rising and falling on my frail body like hammers. I blocked as much as I could, keeping my face away from his attacks. As he began to tire, I spotted my opportunity and smashed my right elbow into his nose, hearing a satisfying crack as the cartilage was broken. He screamed and crawled away, blood dripping from his crooked nose. I stumbled to my feet and caught my breath, tasting blood with each gasp.

The soldiers watching were losing their minds, shouting and cheering on the fight as if we were nothing but mindless animals. Strangely, their cheers began to strengthen me, surfacing a part of me I didn't know existed until now: Ferocity.

With a roar I dashed towards the boy without hesitation. I punched him with all my strength in the gut, causing him to spit blood violently. I threw a second fist into his gut as he convulsed and released the content of his stomach on the floor below. He doubled over, groaning, and his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He wasn't going to be getting up anytime soon.

I was engulfed by rage; I couldn't stop myself. I grabbed his skull and smashed my kneecap into his face. His head and body was flung backwards as he fell to the ground, a huge, bleeding cut above his nose. The fight was over as quickly as it started.

I stood there, fists clenched and covered in blood. I stared at the unconscious boy at my feet, realizing what I had done. I had reacted without thinking; my mind had been completely overpowered by instinct. Seven years struggling to fight and survive in the cold streets of Vessius had made me impulsive, fueled by my senses, unable to put thoughts before actions. I was an animal; mindless.

The cheering snapped me out of my daze. My mind began to function again and I stumbled around the arena, looking for a way out of this hellhole.

The barred door opened with a loud hiss, and two men in black tuxedos came walking towards me. Three soldiers armed with MA5B Assault Rifles accompanied them. I watched the men cautious and began to back away.

The man on the left was tall and well groomed, with sleek black hair, piercing blue eyes, and a chiseled face. A symbol of a skull with two crossing rifles behind it was displayed on his shoulder.

The man on the right was someone I had seen several times before throughout my seven years of life. His brown eyes gazed upon me and his face remained emotionless. Fear rushed through my body as my mind attached a name to him; Father.

"You were right, my friend. The boy is a fierce fighter. We could certainly use a child with his skills in our program." Spoke the man on the left as he reached me, eyes examining the bruises on my face and chest.

"I told you you wouldn't be disappointed, Grayson." Replied my father, a sinister grin growing on his face.

"But are you willing to sell him to us? He is, of course, your son." Grayson asked.

"He has been nothing but a burden all his life. He'd be a far better Insurrectionist than he was a son." said my Father, completely without emotion. He spoke the words so calmly, as if I meant absolutely nothing to him. He'd rather die than admit that I was his son.

"So be it. Come with me back to Ragnarok and we'll discuss the price. Send the boy away with the others and let the arena matches continue." Concluded Grayson as he and my father began to walk away.

Suddenly, a flash of blinding light clouded my vision as a blast of excruciating pain surged through my brain. My eyes rolled into the back of my eye sockets as I was again enveloped in darkness. The strike from the butt of the rifle had knocked me to the ground, unconscious.

* * *

><p>Ice cold water smacked into my face and brought me back to consciousness. I coughed violently and spat out water, my body shivering from the cold. My lungs began pulsing with pain as I struggled to breathe. After a few frightening moments, I was able to catch my breath and calm myself. My mind activated and instinct put

my body on full alert as I scanned my surroundings.<p>

I was in a small room, barely big enough to hold ten people. A single light bulb hung from the ceiling, casting the room in ominous dim light. The walls were completely bare and made of gray metal and the floor was made of the same material. A man in the same gray armor as the soldiers I had seen in the Arena sat across from me, in front of a thick metal door. A Helmet adorned his head and covered his face and eyes from view. A metal bucket lay at his feet.

I immediately noticed that I was completely naked, and my hands were cuffed and chained above my head to the wall behind me. I panicked, and began to struggle to free my hands to no avail.

"Stop that." Spoke the man suddenly. I obeyed. After a few moments of silence, he spoke again, "What is your name?"

I stared at the man, not knowing what to expect. Instinct, the little demon that it was, forced me to answer him.

"Iâ€|umâ€|its-" I never got to even speak my name. In an instant, the man's armored fist smashed into my chest, cracking one of my ribs. The most pain I've ever felt in my life overtook me and I began to convulse. The man sat there, motionless, as I shouted in pain for what seemed like an eternity.

I began to drift in and out of consciousness, the pain numbing my mind.

"You have no name. You have no home. You have no family." Spoke the soldier, his voice calm. The fucking bastard! "Your life didn't start when you crawled out of your whore of a mother. It starts in this room, in this very moment."

"I'LL KILL YOU!" I shouted at him through spasms of pain.

He stood and struck me across the cheek, whipping my head in the opposite direction as spit was launched from my mouth. I didn't feel it; my entire body was already numb.

"When I come back, I want you to have an answer for this question; what are you?" said the soldier as he opened the door behind him.

"â€|fuck youâ€|" I managed to say before he left the room and closed the door.

I was alone again.

I don't know how long I sat in that room for. Every now and then I would snap in and out of consciousness. The room reminded me of my life; empty, isolated, dark, depressing.

What am I? What the hell kind of question was that? I was an outcast, a boy born into this world to struggle to survive. Unloved and unwanted by his father, I was left alone and homeless, wandering the streets of Vessius; fighting and stealing to live from day to day. I was being fucked with, by a god that only wanted to see me suffer.

I didn't know how much time I had wasted chained to the wall in that

room. Hours? Days? Maybe even months? I had no clue, and it didn't matter. I began to lose hope of ever leaving this godforsaken place.

When my stomach began to cave in from hunger, a small hiss came to my ears as the metal door slid open. The soldier walked into the room and stuffed a loaf of bread into my mouth, watching silently as I swallowed it whole. After I was finished, he spoke again.

"What are you?" he asked. I had spent a large amount of time formulating my answer.

"I'm a victim. I didn't ask for any of this to happen, I didn't even ask to be born. My life has been nothing but a living hell and I want nothing more than to die in here." I grew quiet, contempt with my answer. The soldier stood above me, unmoving and silent.

"Wrong answer."

I screamed in horror as 50,000 volts of electricity surged through my body. My muscled pulsed in fiery pain and became numb, and my organs began to stress under the voltage. I could smell smoke leave my mouth as the soldier removed the Taser from my chest. I began to gurgle and sputter as once again I drifted into darknessâ€¦

* * *

><p>When I finally awoke I was alone again. Feeling had begun to come back into my muscles and the pain was beginning to become bearable. Tears began to fall from my face as I broke down, sobbing. I had been broken.</p>

Three more times the soldier walked into the room and asked his question, and three more times I gave him the wrong answer. I tasted the stinging jolts of static course through my body after each wrong answer, then the inevitable dive into unconsciousness.

After what seemed like an eternity, the soldier walked into the room again, Taser firm in his hands. I glared at him fiercely, pure hatred for the man showing in my eyes.

"What are you?" he asked, his voice still emotionless.

I began to chuckle, madness in my eyes. I understood everything now. I understood why my life was filled with undesired pain. Never again would I be broken; my destiny was clear to me. I had no emotions, no feelings. I didn't need them. Life's too cruel to live it by suffering; only the strong survived in this world.

"I am a demon." I answered, my voice covered in rage.

"Why?" the soldier asked, intrigued.

"Because demons exist to exact justice on those that deserve it. I'm no longer human; I've rid myself of their useless emotions. I am a beast, driven by instinct alone and fueled by rage and hatred. My life has been my ultimate suffering, and only by knowing true pain, can I inflict it on others." I answered.

"So you exist to kill those that deserve death? That is your

definition of justice? I watched your fight in the arena; you're ruthless and brutal. A beast creeps within your soul. You have suffered so much for a reason. Fate has chosen you to balance the scales of humanity and eliminate those that threaten justice. We can help you become a demon, boy. We can shape you into a perfect soldier, and help you achieve the justice that you were not granted."

The soldier dug out a folded piece of paper from one of his pockets and unfolded it. He showed it to me, and only one word was written on it, "**Vanguard**".

"This is your new identity." Spoke the guard. "This name will signify your new life. Nothing else in your past matters now. I'm giving you a chance to start your life anew, Vanguard. Don't waste it."

The soldier took out a key and unlocked the shackles on my hands, freeing me from the wall. "Come, you're ready to begin your training." He said as he began to walk out of the door.

He was right; this is where my life would begin. I had a reason to keep living, to keep fighting.

But for now, to hell with that. I had to keep a promise I made to myself a while ago. I was going to kill this motherfucker.

I mustered my strength and leapt at the soldier, intending to grip him in a chokehold and strangle him to death. The soldier quickly turned around and caught me in midair, grabbing my shoulder and slamming me on to the floor. He pressed his knee into my back and wrapped his arm around my neck, constricting my windpipe and leaving me struggling for air.

"You're gonna have to be a lot quicker than that if you plan to kill me." chuckled the soldier.

* * *

><p>We left the room and entered a hallway with lockers covering the walls. I could see rows and rows of doors leading to rooms like the one I had been imprisoned in all throughout the hallway.</p>

The soldier opened a locker labeled "**Vanguard**" and took out a black uniform. He tossed it to me, "Put it on."

I put on the uniform, and surprisingly it fit perfectly. My name was printed on the back of the uniform in big yellow letters.

We continued down the hallway, which led to even more and more hallways cluttered with Insurrectionist soldiers scurrying here and there. We rounded a corner and came up to a huge set of metal doors labeled "**Briefing Room A-12**" with two armed soldiers on both sides of it.

"Prometheus." Spoke the soldier to one of the guards. With a nod, the guard opened the double doors and ushered us inside the room.

The room was huge and packed with soldiers, all standing guard against the walls. A hundred chairs were placed in ten rows in the center of the room, all but one accompanied by children around my age

group and wearing the same uniform as me. A metal stage was at the front of the room, with the Liberation Front flag hanging on the back wall. Several men in tuxedos stood atop the stage, and I recognized Grayson standing in front of a microphone. The room was quiet save for the rare chatter between the guards.

A soldier escorted me to the only empty chair in the back row, beside a boy with the name "***Zeke***" etched onto the back of his uniform.

Zeke was small, about my size, and had shaggy black hair that covered his forehead and eyebrows. He glanced at me with ice blue eyes, as if calculating what the best method to murder me was. A large, fresh cut reached from his forehead down to his cheek, and his fingers twitched every now and then, a sure sign that he had been tased recently. I wasn't the only one here who had been tortured, it seemed.

"Greetings." began Grayson, whose voice echoed throughout the room. All chatter ceased immediately. "I am General John Grayson, leader of the Liberation Front. For those who don't know what the Liberation Front is, it is an organization of numerous insurgent factions that have allied together to rebel against the United Nations Space Command since 2528. We are one of the strongest insurrectionist groups to declare war against the UNSC, and our army spans from the Paris system, the Eridanus system, and even as far as the Sigma Octanus system. For years we've fought valiantly against the tyranny of the UNSC, but we are losing this war. Even while the UNSC are fighting with all their resources against the Covenant army, we are still unable to turn the tide of our war; until now. I'm sure most of you have heard of the legendary Spartans that have led the UNSC from victory to victory throughout their war with the Covenant."

At the mention of the super soldiers, chatter between the guards and the kids began to rise.

"ONI's Spartan-II Project has been above classified for years, without a hint of information on the project escaping their offices. Leaked information has been received by us that suggest that the UNSC is successfully produced another generation of Spartans, Codenamed the Spartan-III Program. We believe that they now possess an army of Spartans at their disposal. If we don't act immediately, then this war is lost." Grayson paused, letting the reality of the situation seep in. an army of Spartan super soldier? Damn.

"The UNSC has made a fatal mistake, my friends." He continued. "Last month, one of our spies within ONI's Beta-5 Division was able to copy and transfer documents and files regarding the Spartan-II Program to us. Using the information, we plan to halt funding on all operations and focus all our time, resources, and funds to creating our own breed of super soldiers. With Spartans at the Liberation Front's disposal, we could greatly affect the war and finally gain an upper hand against the UNSC. You, my children, will be the first generation of Insurrectionist Spartans. You will be the candidates for the Spartan-IV Program."

Everyone in the room was wide with shock. We were going to become a new Generation of Spartans? Is this what the soldier meant when he said they could help me achieve my goal?

Grayson raised his hand to stop the whispering that had cascaded throughout the room. "The road will be long and gruesome, and some of you may not make it to the end; but do not be afraid. We will mold you into killers. We will change you into cold, heartless beings capable of executing any order without delay or hesitation. You will be killing machines, invincible, and you will help the Liberation shatter the UNSC Empire." That sounded pretty damn good to me. I looked over at Zeke, who had a wide grin. He must've liked that idea too. I wondered what his story was.

"You will be escorted to the Barracks to get some rest, and then tomorrow, your training will begin. You are dismissed." concluded Grayson as he stepped down from the microphone and left the room.

We stood, all one hundred Spartan-IV candidates, and were escorted back down the halls by the soldiers. I walked in silence, as did many of us, letting what we just heard sink into our minds.
Spartans!

The Barracks was a massive room, at least half a kilometer long, with metal cots lined down in rows of ten, just like the chairs in the Debriefing room. A small locker was laid in front of each cot, with the owners name written on it.

"Try to get some sleep, you'll need a shitload of energy for your first day of training tomorrow." chuckled the soldiers as they left the room and locked the door behind them.

I began searching for my cot as the other kids socialized about what had just occurred. I noticed that not one of them spoke of their pasts before coming here, a sure sign that they had been broken in the same way that I had been.

I found my cot in the corner of the room, coincidentally right next to Zeke's. The cot above me belonged to "**Hercules**," whoever the hell that was. With a codename like that, I'm not sure I wanted to find out.

"This is fucking crazy!" shouted a blonde boy a few feet away from me. He had spiky blonde hair and a small body frame, his arms resembling sticks attached to a torso. "They can't really expect us to become super soldiers, we're just kids!"

"Oh come off it, Bambi. You've been complaining ever since we got here." Spoke a female voice from the cot in front of me. The girl lay on her back, arms under her head as if she didn't have a care in the world. Her eyes were a dark green and long black hair reached down to her shoulders. She was a few years older than me, maybe 13 or 14. Her features were striking, causing me to blush when I saw her. The name "**Boss**" was written on her locker.

She glanced at me and I quickly turned my gaze to Bambi, who walked down the rows of cots and continued his rant. I could feel her gaze on me still.

"What's your name?" she asked, pretending she couldn't read the word written on my locker.

"Vanguard." I replied quickly, blushing even more. She stared at me for a few more seconds before lying back in her cot.

"So, do you know how long we were in those cells for?" I asked nervously. I had meant to ask one of the soldiers that question, but had missed my chance.

"Three days for us, four for you. You were the last one out of the cells, ya know. You must be one tough motherfucker." She replied, staring at me again.

Shock overcame me as I sounded the words. Four days. Four whole days locked in that cell, being mentally and physically tortured. I sat back in my cot, letting that sink in. four fucking days.

Zeke found his cot and slumped in it, and I began to hear his soft snoring a few seconds later. I realized that the entire room had gotten quieter as exhaustion began to affect the others too, who fell into their cots and drifted to sleep. Fatigue gripped me too and my eyes began to droop, and I didn't fight it. In a matter of seconds, I was asleep too.

I remember having a dream about my father that night. It was the last one I ever had.

2. I: Jailbreak

Chapter II: Jailbreak

July 8, 2544 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System.

"Get up you worthless maggots! I want all of you dressed and inside the Debriefing Room in five minutes! GET MOVING!" shouted Drill Sergeant Thorn, the veins on his neck pulsing as his voice boomed throughout the room. Everyone was up and out of bed in ten seconds flat, no one daring to suffer Thorn's wrath; except me.

Sometime during the night the Medical Personnel had bandaged my chest and shot a gluey biofoam into my broken rib, temporarily sticking the fragmented pieces together until they were able to clone a new one. They must've given me some kind of pain reliever or something, because I slept clean through Thorn's shouting. I regretted it immediately.

Thorn spotted my sleeping body like a hawk, his black eyes burning with anger. The dark-skinned sergeant stomped to my cot, his armored boots ringing with every step. I imagined he had the evilest grin I've ever seen on a person before as he proceeded to "wake me up."

30,000 volts of electricity woke me from my dreams. I shot up, eyes wide and screaming as once again my body spasmed under the burning static. I dropped to the floor with a thud as Thorn removed the Taser and stood above me. He let me lay there, twitching and groaning in pain as the others watched in shock.

Thorn gripped me by the neck and lifted me into the air until we were eye-to-eye, causing me to struggle to breathe.

"When I say 'move,' you move. When I say 'jump,' you better jump ten

feet into the air. When I say 'fuck you,' you bend over and say 'when and where, sir?' DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?" he roared, his tone causing me to nearly shit myself. Damn, this motherfucker was scary!

"Argh-urrrgh" was all I managed to say.

Thorn dropped me to the ground and exited the Barracks, leaving me gasping for air and the others getting dressed as quickly as they could.

"A little heads up too much to ask for?" I mumbled to Boss, who was slipping into a fresh uniform.

"Hey, you're on your own in here, kid. Get use to it." She replied.

I snorted as I rubbed my muscles back to life and took off my uniform, grabbing the fresh pair that had been placed in my locker.

* * *

><p>We entered the Debriefing Room with thirty seconds to spare. This time, the room was occupied by several large tables filled with dishes of eggs, bacon, pancakes, and bread. Breakfast! We ran to the tables and began to dig in, filling our stomachs to the brim with the delicious food. After we were all full and content, a group of soldiers walked into the room and motioned for us to follow them.</p>

The soldiers led us out of the Debriefing room and down several empty hallways. We walked in silence, but our curiosity was eating us inside. We reached a large set of titanium doors labeled "Training Grounds**," and came to a halt. One of the soldiers entered a 16-digit pass code into a pad to the left of the door. When he was finished, a loud beep escaped the pad as the door hissed open. We were immediately hit by the warm, fresh air of Vessius as the soldiers led us through the doors and outside.

We walked out into a kilometer long yard, surrounded on all sides by different sections of the building. Sand covered the ground, and the sun that kept the Paris System alive beamed down on us with warm brilliance. A firing range was constructed on the opposite side of the yard, and a sparring area sat a few yards away. Several soldiers patrolled the yard, and I could spot snipers watching from the rooftops. Grayson and Sergeant Thorn stood at the center of the yard, awaiting our arrival.

"Good morning." said Grayson as he spotted us. We stopped in front of him, eager to hear what he had to say.

"Welcome to your first day of training. This is Ragnarok, the Liberation Front's biggest and most advanced training facility." He said as he pointed at the building surrounding us. "This will be your new home, so get used to it."

Grayson stepped back and nodded to Thorn, who chuckled and grew a sinister grin.

"Listen up, maggots; I'm only going to say this once. Today's goal is escape; your weapon of choice is teamwork. If you cannot learn to adapt and function as a team, you will not be able to function as Spartans. You will have 6 hours to complete your mission. If you fail to complete it in time, the punishment will be beyond severe." Thorn spoke.

We began to grow uneasy, fearing exactly what our mission was. Escape? Teamwork? This guy wasn't making any sense and our curiosity was increasing with each passing second.

"You will be split into teams of ten and the mission will begin when you wake up. Good luck." concluded Thorn. He retrieved a small cylindrical object from his pocket, as the other soldiers began to put on gas masks. Wait, wake up? What the fuck was he talking about?

Thorn pulled out a small pin on the object and tossed it at our feet, backing away as he fastened a gas mask over his face. As we realized what was happening, the object exploded with a deafening boom and clouded the air with foggy white gas. We began to scream and curse as we involuntarily breathed in the gas.

Within seconds, my eyes began to droop and become glassy as fatigue clouded my head. I spotted the others slump to the ground, powerless to resist the effects of the gas. I dropped to one knee as my brain began to shut down, drowsiness overcoming me. With a curse I hit the ground, asleep.

* * *

><p>I awoke with a groan, almost immediately realizing that something was wrong. I looked down to see that my entire torso was covered by rope, which was tied tightly to the wooden chair that I was sitting on. Shit; I thought as I struggled to free myself to no avail.</p>

I looked around and realized that I was in a room that resembled the cell that I had been trapped in a few days ago, except that this room was much bigger. A metal door was built into the wall directly in front of me and the electronic pad beside it read "***Unlocked***", as if mocking me.

There were nine other children present in the room with me, all tied by rope to a wooden chair identical to mine. I spotted Boss a few feet away from me, head bowed as she tried to gnaw the rope apart. After a few minutes she realized that the rope was too thick, and proceeded to curse loudly in frustration.

I saw Zeke to the far right of me, face emotionless and foot tapping in a slow rhythm. Glad to see that at least one of us was managing to remain calm.

Behind me was Hercules, who was snoring loudly and wetting the rope below him with the long strands of saliva that fell from his mouth. He was pretty huge for his age, and you would never have guessed that he was only nine years old. He was easily five feet tall, with short brown hair and eyes that could make a starving lion hesitate to mess with him. Hercules was easily the strongest one of all of us, being able to lift my cot with relative ease when the photo of his mother fell under it. No one asked him why or how he still had that picture,

and no one ever thought about snitching on him either. Erasing your past was hard, and he clearly wasn't ready to let her go just yet.

Next to Hercules was Bambi, the spiky, blonde haired prick that was bitching and complaining yesterday. He was awake, eyes wide with fear as he mumbled about different ways that we could be killed while imprisoned in this room. If my hands were free I would've punched him in the jaw immediately.

To my left was a boy that I had only talked to once, but in that short amount of time he had managed to make me despise him. He had long, black hair that reached his shoulders, and piercing blue eyes. He was fragile and lanky, easily reaching five feet tall. He was quiet for the most part, but when he wanted to express his opinion, he REALLY expressed his opinion; and frankly, that's what pissed me off about him. He was your typical "I work alone, stay out of my way" kind of person, and it usually led to conflict with the others. He took our whole training as nothing but a cruel joke, expecting that someday Thorn would come up to him laughing, say that the whole thing was a fucking prank, and tell him to head home. His shallow but firm denial in the severance of our situation proved that he was inevitably going to fail at becoming a Spartan warrior, or even a simple soldier at that. The name "**Stranger-Come-Knocking**" was etched onto his uniform, an odd but fitting name for him. He was a stranger, a complete outcast, in a room full of Spartans.

The other four were people I had seen in the Debriefing Room yesterday, but never met before. There was a small, blonde haired boy with a large, red scar on his left eye; codenamed "**Tiger**." Next to him was a teenage boy with long blonde hair and a face that resembled an elf's, who I had seen flirting with some of the girls in the Barracks; "**Bachelor**." Behind Boss was a short, black haired, eight year old boy, who wore a rather large pair of glasses; "**Gizmo**." The last kid I didn't know was a girl with curly brown hair and hazel eyes. She looked like the complete opposite of someone training to be a cold-hearted killer. Her codename was "**Princess**" and I only remembered it because it was so odd, that they would name a future Spartan that.

"Glad to see that you're finally awake, Vanguard." said Boss as she noticed me looking around the room.

"Vanguard? So you're the one that was in the cell for four days?" asked Gizmo, face filled with amazement. His question quickly brought the eyes of Tiger and Stranger down on me, causing me to immediately feel a lot more uncomfortable.

"Uh yeahâ€|that's me." I replied, trying not to sound too modest.

Stranger began to laugh, "Four days? Heh, that's pretty disappointing if you ask me. I was able to escape after 46 hours, by using my feet to-"

"Well then I guess it's a good thing that I don't give a flying fuck what you think." I growled, cutting him off midsentence.

"Whatever." Muttered stranger, who decided that humming to himself was far more entertaining than arguing with me.

"Or they could come in with Covenant Energy Swords and slice our stomachs open and watch as our intestines dropped to the floor!" muttered Bambi, rather loudly. We all decided to act like he didn't exist.

"There are ten of us here," started Boss. "and Thorn said we were going to be split into teams of ten. So is this our team? Is this the mission? Are we suppose to escape from this room?"

"That would make the most sense. But then again, nothing they do to us makes sense." stated Zeke. The room was silent as everyone pondered what Zeke had said, except for Hercules, who was the only one still asleep.

"Whatever our mission is, it might have something to with that." said Tiger, who was staring at a small digital clock that was hanging above the door. It was a timer, obviously, and was currently at 20 seconds, the red digits changing after each second.

"I guess we'll find out exactly what the fuck is going on in a few seconds." I said as the clock hit 5 seconds.

4|3|2|1|0

At first, nothing happened. After a few moments of involuntary silence, the door swung open as a soldier wearing a helmet and armor walked into the room. He was holding a cloth in one hand and a large bucket filled with water in the other. He stopped in front of us, head surveying the room as if he was choosing one of us for something.

"You come to shine our shoes?" I asked, grinning. I know, stupid thing to say, but hey, everyone else was thinking it too. Don't kill the fucking messenger.

The soldier walked over to me and dropped the bucket at my feet, apparently wanting to wash my shoes first. He used his free hand to try and tilt my head backwards, with my nose pointing towards the ceiling. I resisted, and he smashed his fist into my cheek, cutting my lip.

"Aw fuck, that smarts." I mumbled as he tilted my head backwards again. I was too weak to resist again. He opened my mouth and placed the cloth over my face. It smelled of soap, strangely.

The soldier lifted the bucket and began to pour water over the cloth, and into my mouth. Pure terror gripped me as my mouth and throat began to fill with water. I tried to scream and cry, but all that came out was streams of water. The soldier continued to pour a constant flow of water into my mouth, confusing my brain into thinking that I was drowning.

I gurgled and sputtered as my lungs began to scream for air, causing waves of pain to course through me. I was suffocating, or so I thought, and it was the most pain I've ever felt in my life. I tried to close my eyes and picture myself somewhere else, anywhere else, but all I could think of was sinking down into an ocean of water, lungs collapsing as I began to fade into oblivion.

After what seemed like an eternity of endless pain, the water stopped. I lowered my head and vomited the water from my system, creating a good sized puddle on the floor.

The soldier picked the cloth up from off the floor where it had fell, and walked out of the room. A few seconds later, the timer above the door reset itself, flashing "30:00" before it began to count down again.

I coughed violently, trying to get the rest of the water out of my lungs as they continued to burn. My heart was racing and showed no sign of slowing down, a side effect of that near-death experience.

"Oh my..." muttered Princess, who had streams of tears falling from her terrified eyes.

"God help us all!" mumbled Bachelor. Even Hercules had been woken up by the commotion, his eyes full of shock.

"Arghh! god it burns." I groaned as a fresh wave of pain coursed through me.

"Stop talking! You'll only make it worse!" Boss exclaimed. I noticed that she was beyond concerned for me, something that I've never seen from her before. But then again, I've never been water-boarded before either.

"Look, the clock reset itself after the guard left. I'm guessing that after every thirty minutes, he'll come back and do it to someone else." stated Zeke. The room became deathly silent as everyone began to wonder if they were next.

"Thorn was right. The only way out of this is to escape." said Boss.

"But how?" Tiger wondered aloud.

"I just wanna go home. I just wanna see my mom and my sister again. Please god let me get out of this alive." mumbled Bambi, his voice shaky. His skin was pale, and he looked as if he'd just seen a ghost.

"God can't hear you in here." stated Stranger, who remained somewhat calm throughout my entire ordeal. Shit, I bet he ENJOYED watching it; that little bastard.

"I may have an idea, guys." said Gizmo.

"Well then spill it." responded Zeke, eager to hear what the brainiac had to say.

"Escaping from our bonds IS possible, but it would be fairly painful. If someone were to lift their body higher in the chair, they could use their hands to untie the knot behind them. In order to lift themselves higher though, they would have to slip their shoulders out of the collar of their uniform, which would take a lot of friction to accomplish and would tear the flesh from their arms and shoulders. It's not an easy option, but it is our only one so far." concluded Gizmo.

"He's right; it's risky, but it's our only choice. So who's going to be the one to try it." asked Boss, glancing around the room. No one answered her. No one was willing to bear the pain and take the risk, for the sake of freeing all of us. No one was willing to be the hero.

None of the others were expecting me to take up the challenge, obviously due to the fact that my body probably couldn't take any more abuse before I dropped dead. Despite this, I still would've agreed to try it.

I looked at Stranger, almost certain that he would be the one to accept this challenge. I was wrong.

"I'll do it." Hercules was the one who spoke. My respect for him grew immensely, as did everyone else's.

"Try to shimmy your way up the ropes, until your hands reach the knot." said Gizmo.

Hercules spent the next twenty minutes fighting with his bonds, trying to lift himself just an inch higher. About halfway through, he began to pant and groan, small droplets of blood falling to the floor as his arms and shoulders were grated clean of their skin. We watched in silence, mentally cheering him on.

"SHIT!" shouted Boss, suddenly. I wondered why until I glanced up at the timer.

0:00

Fuck!

As if on cue, the soldier walked back into the room, bucket refilled with water and another identical bucket in his other hand. My heart jumped at the sight of the buckets. Water was never as frightening as it was now.

Two other people were about to join my mile high club.

The soldier dropped a bucket in front of Boss, causing her to shake violently as her eyes filled with pure fear.

"Noâ€|noâ€|not herâ€|" I muttered as the soldier tilted her head back and put the cloth over her face. My heart hurt, not physically, but emotionally. She didn't deserve this. No one did.

I turned my head away as the water poured from the bucket, unable to watch. I heard the water hit the cloth, spill into her mouth, fill her throat, and fall to the floor. I remember that sound vividly, even to this day. I would never forget the sobbing and the screams that came from Boss. I've had nightmares about it; me sitting there, powerless to stop her suffering.

When the last drops of water left the bucket the soldier stopped, letting Boss lower her head and sob. Rage, anger, pissed. Those words couldn't even begin to describe what I felt at that moment.

"I'm sorry Bossâ€|" I said as I watched her.

The soldier picked up the other bucket and walked to Bambi, who was beyond panicking.

"No, no no no no no NO! GOD NO! NOT ME, ANYONE BUT ME!" cried Bambi as tears rushed from his eyes. He was freaking out, mentally broken by the thought of having the torture performed on him. He was so weak.

"I'LL DO ANYTHING! PLEASE DON'T DO IT TO ME PLEASE! BACHELOR, TIGER, ZEKE, PRINCESS, ANYONE BUT ME!" he continued to cry. I snapped at the mention of Princess's name.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" I shouted, murderous intent covering my words.

The soldier looked at Bambi, then at Princess. "So be it." He began to walk towards her.

"NO!" I screamed. It wasn't fair, she didn't deserve it.

"DO ME INSTEAD!" came another shout, surprising me. I turned to see who it was; Zeke.

The soldier stopped and turned to Zeke, who was glaring at him with determined eyes. The soldier made his decision and tilted back Zeke's head, who didn't resist in the slightest. His eyes turned and met mine, channeling all his thoughts with just one gaze. This is what he wanted. He was the hero we had been looking for.

Throughout Zeke's torture, he didn't show any signs of pain. He didn't struggle, he didn't whimper. Looking back on that moment, he told me that the thought of protecting Princess fueled him to brave through all of it.

When it was over, the soldier picked up the cloth and the buckets and left the room.

30:00

We sat there in silence, so many emotions flying through the room. I glared at Bambi, who shied away from my gaze, tears still running down his face.

"You're fucking pathetic. You better hope I don't get free because if I do I will beat the living shit out of you." I growled.

"You okay, Zeke?" asked Princess. She was a shy person who rarely ever talked to anyone, but I had a feeling that was gonna change for Zeke.

"Yeahâ€|I'm okay." Zeke managed to say, a small grin emerging from between coughs. Princess smiled back, effectively creating a bond between the two of them.

"AAARGGHHH!" shouted Hercules, his face contorted by pain. Amazingly, he had managed to slip his right arm over the ropes, freeing it, but at a great price. His shoulder and the entire upper half of his arm were red and completely bare of skin, dripping blood everywhere. It wasn't enough to threaten his life, but he would still need medical

treatment soon. His uniform was ripped at the collar all the way down the right side of his torso and arm, caused by the friction between it and the rope.

"Way to go, Hercules!" exclaimed Gizmo, amazed that he was able to go beyond the call of duty. Similar cheers came from the others.

With his arm free, Hercules easily slipped his other arm free of the rope, with room to spare. In seconds, he had untied the knot behind his chair and freed himself of the rope.

Hercules began to walk towards Boss, intending to untie her first.

"No, untie me first." I said before he reached the girl. Hercules obeyed and quickly freed me from my bonds.

I thanked him and lifted out of my chair, stretching. When I was finished, I walked towards Bambi, Glaring at him intensely. I untied him, letting him stand. He turned towards me, eyes wide with fear as he wondered if I was going to keep my word. Little did he know, that I ALWAYS keep my word.

"Listen, Vanguard, I—" he started.

I smashed my fist into his jaw, dislocating it on impact. He fell backwards, but I gripped him by the collar of his uniform and pulled him back towards me. I wasn't done yet. I slammed my knee into his gut, causing him to gurgle and bend over. In finality, I shoved him backwards, into the wooden chair. He hit the chair with a thud, breaking it, and then fell to the floor.

"Don't you ever value your own life over that of an innocent ever again." I said to him as he lay on the floor, crying.

"Well, I guess he got what he deserved." spoke Hercules, who had successfully untied everyone else. Boss chuckled as she removed Hercules's shirt and used it to bandage his arm.

"So what now?" asked Stranger, who was staring at the clock.
15:46.

"Escape." Boss replied, voice firm.

"How?" asked Stranger.

And just like that, I had an idea!

"Here's what we do." I started, crouching to the floor.

* * *

><p>0:00</p>

The soldier walked into the room a third time, a bucket of water in each hand. As he entered the room, he must've been pretty surprised to see only me sitting in the center of the room, flipping him the bird.

Suddenly, Zeke leapt from the wall beside the door where he was

crouched and tackled the soldier, causing him to drop the buckets and spill their contents everywhere. The soldier fell to the floor, and was quickly subdued by Zeke, Tiger, Gizmo, and Boss. The soldier struggled and cursed, but Zeke was able to lock him in a vicious chokehold as Gizmo and Boss subdued his arms. The soldier's helmet and chest piece were separated, leaving him vulnerable at the neck. This spot would prove fatal for him. After a minute of struggling, the soldier began to grow weaker as Zeke's hold on his neck got stronger. When the soldier stopped struggling, Zeke let go, leaving the man dead on the floor.

He searched the body and found a Taser in one of the soldiers back pockets. Suddenly, Stranger swiped it from Zeke's hand and stepped back and out of the doorway, into the hallway beyond. What the hell?

"I'm afraid this is where we part ways, guys." said Stranger, voice cold.

"What the hell, Stranger!" I said as I stepped towards him. He pointed the Taser at me, stopping me in my tracks.

"Don't follow me, I'm going by myself. I'm not much of a team player and you'll just slow me down." spoke Stranger. And with that, he was gone.

"That asshole!" I cursed, frustrated.

"Let him go, it doesn't matter. Let's just stick together, and escape. I'm on point, Vanguard you cover the rear." ordered Boss, who was clearly a natural born leader. No one objected to her being in command.

One by one we stepped out of the room and into the hallway, staying quiet and low to the ground. I glared at Bambi as he slipped by me, trying his hardest not to meet my gaze.

"Get moving." I growled as I shoved him out of the door.

The hallway split into two directions, left and right. Stranger had wandered off down the left path, so we decided to head down the right. We followed the hallway, always vigilant and looking for any signs of guards or security cameras.

The hallway was one way, with no doors or other hallways connected to it. We reached a turn in the hallway and came to a halt at the corner. Boss gripped the wall and glanced over the edge and around the corner. After a few moments, she looked at us nodded. It was clear.

We rounded the corner and came up to a door, the electric pad beside it reading "**Garage: Unlocked**." Boss slowly opened the door, with Zeke crouched behind her, ready to tackle any threat that was beyond it. She opened the door completely and we walked into the Garage.

The Garage was half a kilometer long, and rows of M12 LRV "Warthog's" were parked on both sides. The rows were neat and orderly, except for several Warthogs that were missing and left gaps in the rows. A massive doorway sat at the end of the Garage, strangely open and

allowing us to see a thick forest beyond.

We walked up to the nearest warthog, which had been modified to exclude the LAAG minigun, in order to carry more soldiers. Strangely, it had the keys still in the ignition.

"Why would they leave the Garage door open and the keys in the vehicle?" wondered Gizmo. I chuckled and patted him on the back.

"When life gives you lemonsâ€œ!" I said with a grin as I hopped into the Driver's seat.

"Shotgun!" exclaimed Boss as she leapt into the seat next to me. Zeke, Tiger, Bachelor, Princess, Hercules, Bambi, and Gizmo all piled into the back, leaving three seats to spare.

"Alright, here we go!" I shouted as I turned the key and started the Warthog. It roared to life, sending a burst of adrenaline into my body.

"You do know how to driveâ€œright?" asked Boss, who was beginning to get a little nervous.

"Hell no, I'm only seven years old!" I shouted as I slammed my foot on the gas.

The Warthog lurched forward as I turned the wheel to the left. The Warthog turned in response to the wheel and shot out of the garage and into the forest. I kept us on a dirt path that led deeper into the forest as the Warthog began to pick up speed. I looked over to see Boss get paler and paler as the speedometer hit 60mph. I heard a shout as Bachelor vomited out of the side of the Warthog, his motion sickness getting the better of him.

"Come on guys I'm not THAT bad of a driver!" I shouted as the path took a sharp right turn.

"Vanguard incoming!" shouted Boss, who was pointing at the sky. I turned in time to see a D77-TC Pelican hovering in front of us, its 70mm Chaingun pointed directly at us. Shit!

"Buckle up!" I yelled as I took another sharp right to avoid the burst of 70mm bullets raining down on our position. I left the path and headed farther into the forest, careful to stay out of the Pelicans line of fire while staying parallel to the path. Wouldn't want to get lost, now would we?

"What the fuck was that?" yelled Zeke as he struggled to stay in his seat. Damn dude, did you not hear me when I said 'buckle up?'

"We're gonna die! We're gonna die!" groaned Bambi, who had his eyes closed and his head in his lap. These people really do NOT appreciate my driving.

"Van, look out!" yelled Zeke as he spotted the pelican flying close behind us. Van? That nicknames probably gonna stick.

The Pelican opened fire again, bullets impacting with the bumper of our Warthog and causing it to detach from the vehicle. I hit the

brakes and turned the wheel to the right, which caused the Warthog to power slide to the left. Holy shit, that was cool!

I hit the gas pedal and surged the warthog back on the path, pushing the dial on the speedometer up to the 75mph mark. Princess screamed as bullets hit the side of the Warthog, denting the armor and some even sinking through. I cursed. No matter how fast we drove the pelican was easily able to catch us!

Boss shouted as a line of ammo cut through the hood of the Warthog and the windshield, shattering it and spraying glass everywhere. Shards of glass cut my cheeks and face as I turned my head to avoid my eyes getting scratched. Ouch.

I looked up to see the Pelican break off and fly away, leaving us alone. Surprised, I looked ahead and saw a massive tunnel racing towards us. We didn't come this far to stop now.

I drove into the tunnel and kept going, taking note of the dim lighting and concrete road under us. Up ahead I spotted several other Warthogs parked in the middle of the tunnel, and a large group of soldiers waiting behind them.

I hit the brakes when we reached the other Warthogs and jumped out of the Warthog, as did the others. I looked around and saw at least twenty soldiers in front of us, all armed with MA5Bs, and Sergeant Thorn standing in front of them. Stranger was kneeled at his feet, gagged and handcuffed.

"Congratulations on completing your first training exercise!" said Thorn, a grin on his face. "Most of you did an admirable job." We remained silent.

"I'm afraid that the mission is not yet over, though." Thorn declared, his grin gone almost as quickly as it had arrived.

"What?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"This mission," started Thorn, "was about teamwork, and being able to band together under pressing circumstances to achieve victory. Teamwork is vital to being an effective Spartan, and only works perfectly if everyone cooperates. Unfortunately, you were unable to have everyone cooperate. Raphael here, decided to abandon teamwork and operate on his own, which is something that we strongly discourage here." Stranger flinched at the mention of his real name. Thorn continued, "as such he must be punished severely."

A soldier quickly handed Thorn an M6D Pistol, which he pointed at Stranger's head.

"And I'm afraid that the only severe punishment here, is death." He clicked the safety off.

Everything was silent; no one dared move, not even Stranger. No one knew what was going to happen next.

Suddenly, Thorn surprised us all by pointing at Boss. "Come here." She obeyed and walked up to the Sergeant, who handed her the pistol.

"You led the others when they needed a leader. You were born to be the leader of a team of Spartan Elites Boss. That's why we gave you that name. Leaders must know when someone in their team is a liability or a burden; it is their job to dismiss that individual from the group before they threaten the lives of the others." said Thorn. He pointed at Stranger, who was staring at Boss with absolute fear in his eyes.

"He is a liability. Dismiss him from your group." stated Thorn, his face emotionless.

He expected Boss to murder Stranger; right here, right now.

I stared at Boss, who was wide eyed and shaking. Her mind was probably working beyond its extreme, trying to decide what to do. She had Stranger's life in her hands right now. With the pull of a trigger, she could give life, or take it. In Stranger's eyes, she was a god.

In one quick motion, Thorn took the gun from Boss's hands and Pistol-whipped Stranger in the head, knocking him out cold.

"Take him back to the Barracks." He ordered a solder next to him, who picked up the boy and carried him away.

Thorn bent down until he was eye-to-eye with Boss, "Next time, don't hesitate to pull the trigger."

3. I: Oath of Repentance

Chapter III: Oath of Repentance

**September 14, 2549 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System. **

"You hit like a pussy!" I remarked as I wiped the blood from my cut lip. Zeke snarled, his eyes burning with anger, and charged at me again, fists tightened and ready to form more bruises on my face. He reached me in an instant, and launched his left fist towards my cheek. I lifted my left hand and stopped his attack, his fist slamming into my palm instead of my face. I quickly countered and smashed my right fist into his nose, causing him to stagger backwards in pain. He recovered from the blow almost instantly, a large cut stretching across his nose.

"You're gonna regret that." growled Zeke, a sneer on his face and fury in his eyes. With a roar he ran at me again, the wound on his nose only serving to piss him off more. With a grin I raised my fists, preparing for another brawl with the demon known as Zeke.

It was five years ago when I was chosen to become a Spartan Candidate and my life was thrown into hell. Since that fated day, my weeks had consisted of training, sparring, learning the art of war, and staying alive as long as I could. It was hell here; everyday someone would be taken into the Medical Bay; broken ribs, broken arms, broken legs, broken spirits.

The years in training under the Liberation's harsh methods had taught us to form a small group of people we trusted and stick together;

outcasts and loners were doomed to either fail or die. I mostly stayed in the company of my little group; Boss, Zeke, Hercules, Tiger, and Princess. They had been my new family for five years now, and without their help I probably wouldn't died years ago.

I was shocked at how much I had changed in the five years that had past. My hair had gotten longer, and my body was no longer frail and fragile. I could run a mile in five minutes, and could lift almost a hundred and twenty pounds; that's pretty impressive for a twelve year old. With each passing day I became stronger, slowly coming closer to becoming a Spartan Soldier.

Zeke's left fist followed a collision course to my jaw, easily able to dislocate the bone on impact. I side-stepped to the right which caught Zeke completely off-guard, causing him to stumble through the momentum of his swing. I quickly came behind him and wrapped my arm around his neck, squeezing on his windpipe as I attempted to subdue him.

Zeke cursed and spat, struggling intensely to break free of my grip. I began to struggle to keep my hold on him, as if he was growing stronger with each second. Goddamn he's strong!

I cursed as Zeke roared and broke free of my grip, leaving my chest completely exposed. He jabbed his foot forward and buried it in my gut, causing my eyes to grow wide as I was launched backwards. I hit the ground hard, smashing my head against the cement floor as I groaned and held my stomach. The pain was fierce, but bearable; I guess five years of constant torture and training had seriously increased my tolerance for pain.

Almost in an instant Zeke was upon me, eyes red with rage as he brought his fist down upon my face. My head smacked back against the floor in response to his punch, and I could feel a bruise start to itch its way onto my cheek. I closed my eyes and prepared for another attack. It never came.

I opened my eyes to see Zeke being dragged away from me, cursing and struggling as he went. Hercules and Tiger had broken up the fight, subduing Zeke before he could do some serious damage to me. Zeke struggled and fought against their grip, but they remained firm as they dragged him out of the barracks, other candidates watching in fear as he left.

"One of these days he's going to kill you." said Boss, who was staring down at me with pity in her eyes. I stood and wiped the blood from my mouth, coughing as my stomach began to ache intensely.

"I was winning." I replied as I sat on my cot, exhausted.

Everyone seemed to have changed in the last five years, their bodies and minds growing stronger everyday. Boss was eighteen now, making her the oldest candidate here. She had grown during the five years since I first met her; she was at least six feet tall now, and could more than handle her own in a sparring match against Zeke and I. She had grown physically too, particularly in her chest area; Bachelor would always whisper to the other guys about how he'd love to meet her "D-sized twins." She would often beat the shit out of us when she caught us staring at her body; but hey, can't blame a boy for having hormones.

"Of course you were." spoke boss as she rolled her eyes and walked away. Grinning, I tilted my head and watched her go, mesmerized by the brilliance of her curves. Damn.

"Zeke kicked your ass again, huh?" I heard Tiger say as he walked up to me, eyes filled with boredom. "What did you do this time?"

I groaned and rustled my hand through my hair, remembering the event that had caused the confrontation with Zeke.

"He saw me flirting with Princess." I mumbled. Tiger shook his head.

"You're a dumbass, you know that?" and with that, he left.

Well fuck you too. I lay back in my cot and closed my eyes. As much as it pains me to admit it; Tiger was right. Ever since "Operation Jailbreak," Zeke and Princess had been closer than anyone else here; with Thorn and his training being the only reason why they weren't a couple. Anyone could tell that they were inseparable, and Zeke had been water-boarded three times in the past six months for interfering when she was in danger during training exercises. Thorn always told us that relationships only distracted a soldier from the mission, and would lead to betrayal or defeat; try telling that to Bachelor, he's had "Relations" with at least ten girls so far.

"Thinking about how you're going to apologize to Zeke before he kicks your ass again?" asked Gizmo as he past by my cot, a wicked grin on his face.

"No, I'm thinking about why everyone chooses to annoy me whenever I try to get some goddamn sleep." I answered, beyond irritated. That little scrap with Zeke has seriously dented my reputation.

"Alright, alright, I'm going. Better get as much rest as you can, though, we're up next for the training exercise tomorrow." replied Gizmo as he walked away, probably to help repair and reassemble the Warthogs again.

With a sigh I rested my head on my pillow, my eyes drooping from drowsiness. Seconds later I was asleep, a smile on my face as I dreamed of putting a bullet between Zeke's eyes.

* * *

><p>"Tiger, Hercules, Zeke, Gizmo, Boss, Vanguard, Sage, Princess, Blackjack, and Mist. If your name was called then you are to report immediately to the courtyard for debriefing. Everyone else is dismissed for now." Shouted a soldier with a megaphone as we stood in ten rows of ten in front of him, all standing straight and organized. It had taken General Grayson all of ten minutes to teach us how to stand in attention. Actually, no, 'teach' is too nice of a word; 'punishing us until we got it right' is more accurate.</p>

The chosen nine candidates and I stepped forward as we followed the soldier out of the briefing room, the other ninety kids returning to the barracks as they sighed in relief. Everyone knew a meeting with Grayson only meant one thing; trouble. I glanced to the right of me and noticed Zeke glaring at me, obviously still raging over our

conflict earlier. I decided it would be in my best interest to keep as far away from him and princess as I could. I like living.

We followed the soldier down the empty hallways, none of us daring to speak as we pondered what awaited us in the courtyard.

* * *

><p>The sun was high in the sky as we exited the building and entered the courtyard. I cursed inwardly as I averted my eyes from the bright sunlight that had temporarily blinded me. It had been a whole week since I had last been outside.</p>

To our surprise, a D-77 TC Pelican Dropship sat in the center of the courtyard, a low humming resonating from it as its engine purred. Grayson stood in front of the ship, his gaze on us as we approached.

"Good afternoon, Spartans. Today's training exercise will be a bit different than what you're used to. Instead of practicing your combat skills, we will be practicing your learning skills." spoke Grayson as he motioned for us to climb into the Pelican's cargo bay. Shit; I had never been an 'A' student in school and learning wasn't something to get excited about.

I jumped into the pelican and took the seat nearest to the edge, next to boss, and a LF soldier quickly fastened the seat belt across my chest. I yelped as he tightened the belt, knocking the wind out of me. Boss chuckled, causing me to blush furiously.

I watched as Zeke dropped into the seat next to Princess, who was busy examining the cut I had created on his nose during our fight. Zeke glanced at me, and I quickly averted my gaze.

Grayson entered the pelican last and entered the cockpit, taking a seat next to the pilot. After a few seconds the pelican's engine roared back to life, and with a lurch we lifted into the air. I shifted violently in my seat as we rose above the building, the wind creating waves of sound that filled the pelican. As we lifted higher and higher into the air, the cargo door slid shut and drowned the sound of the wind and the engine.

Across from me sat Sage, a beautiful thirteen year old girl with long, black hair and fierce, violet eyes. She was calm and quiet, and no one really knew anything about her or what her story was. The only one who she seemed comfortable around was Boss, who was able to get her to talk about how she got the milky, white scar above her right eye. I had never been on any training exercises with her or gotten any chance to talk to her, but I had instantly grown a crush on her the first time I saw her.

"You okay?" I asked her as I noticed the nervous look on her face. She looked up at me, her gaze causing me to blush intensely.

"I'm just not use to flying, that's all. This is actually the first time I've flown." She replied, a nervous smile on her face.

I blushed and grew silent, too nervous and shy to even reply.

"You're Vanguard right? The guy that all the guards have been talking about?" she asked, catching me off guard.

In the five years that I had been in Ragnarok, I had managed to label myself as "The Difficult One" by the soldiers. I constantly acted out rashly and instinctively, often pissing off Grayson and his men and awarding me constant punishment. Rumors had been going around that soldiers would do everything in their power to keep from being assigned to exercises that I was participating in, in an effort to avoid having to deal with The Difficult One.

I was about to reply, but was cut off by Boss, who nudged me and pointed towards the window, "Van, look." Curious, I looked out of the window and gasped in awe.

The pelican had been gaining altitude, and the vast realm of pale clouds began to vanish, morphing into a sea of darkness. Within minutes, we broke free of Vessius's atmosphere and drifted into the sea of space. Several of the children, me included, were lost for words as we gazed into the breathtaking view around us. Tiny bursts of lights were scattered everywhere, as if they were lighthouses shining from a distance.

I lowered my gaze and was shocked to see a massive object that took up half of the window. White mist hovered over the object as I spotted patches of green, brown, and blue on its surface. I gasped as I realized that I was staring at the planet of Vessius from orbit.

Floating a few miles ahead of our pelican was a massive starship, its titanium nose drifting towards us as we got closer. The ship was enormous, easily three kilometers long and reinforced with gray, titanium plating. Large MAC cannons were mounted on its front and sides, and a large glass dome was carved into its nose. Three large words were painted onto its side; Oath of Repentance.

"Whoa!" I muttered as I gazed upon the ship, awe-struck. So that's what a Destroyer looks like up close!

"First time seeing a war ship?" asked Boss as she watched my eyes.

"Yeah." I managed to reply, "What about you?"

"Far from it. My father was a UNSC marine, so I spent most of my childhood traveling with him on the ship he was stationed on; the Forward unto Dawn." Replied Boss, who lowered her eyes as she was lost in her own memories. I decided not to press the subject.

The pelican continued to drift towards the Oath of Repentance, it's thrusters exhaling pillars of fire.

"This is Greyhawk-14, we are approaching the Oath; ETA ten minutes." Spoke our pilot as he activated his helmet COMM.

"Copy that Greyhawk, opening the hangar bay. Welcome back." Replied a soft, female voice through the Pelican's speakers. In response, our pilot pulled down the throttle and thrust our pelican into another burst of speed. I was jerked backwards as we surged forwards, towards the ship that loomed ahead.

We reached the back of the Destroyer, and the entire cockpit windshield was covered by its hull.

The hangar bay was a rectangular opening in the back of the ship, with several pelican dropships already inside.

"Greyhawk-14 you are authorized to land on dry-dock 7." Came the female voice again.

"Will do." Replied our pilot as we entered the hangar.

Almost instantly I sunk back down into my seat, the feeling of being weightless gone. Hello gravity, I missed you.

The pelican dropped to the metal floor with a thud, and the cargo door slid open. We quickly unstrapped ourselves and jumped out of the pelican, happy to have gravity keeping us grounded again.

"Welcome to the Liberation Front Marathon-Class Destroyer Oath of Repentance. Come, follow me." Called Grayson as he walked by us and into the ship, followed by several LF soldiers.

"This ship is the pride of the Liberation Front." Started Grayson as we followed him down the metal corridors. "Supplies, weapons, soldiers; they're all transported from the Oath. This ship is our lifeline; without it, we could not maintain contact with the other LF branches."

We entered a large room filled with computers, monitors, and crew members who were busy operating them as they kept the Oath alive and kicking. Since the ship had no Artificial Intelligence system, constant maintenance had to be conducted manually by the crew.

Gizmo gasped in wonder, his eyes sparkling as he gazed at the electronics. What a geek.

"This is the communications room. This is where we stay in constant contact with the other Liberation Front forces stationed across the Milky Way. Expert Programmers encrypt our transmissions, which keeps the UNSC from eavesdropping." Explained Grayson as he continued to walk through the room, careful not to disturb the crew.

"Cool!" exclaimed Gizmo as he followed the General, clearly fascinated.

"What exactly IS the Liberation Front, sir? Why the soldiers? Why the Oath? Why the war with the UNSC?" asked Tiger, his curiosity getting the better of him. Grayson stopped and looked back at him, as if surprised that he hadn't already known the answers.

"The Liberation Front," he started as he continued walking, leaving the communications room and entering another corridor, "is a coalition of insurrectionist factions fighting for the future of humanity. Our armies stretch across the human colonies, and we fight to free them from the rule of the UNSC. For more than twenty years our war has raged."

"The UNSC superpower controls all of the human colonies with an iron fist; why wage war against an enemy that powerful?" asked Tiger

again. A few months ago we had found out that Tiger's father was Mark Dallas, a renowned UNSC admiral who had fought on Harvest when the covenant had first made contact. Tiger had always admired his father and the UNSC, and it had taken Grayson almost a year to break his attachment to them both.

"The UNSC is weak. War with the Covenant has weakened their empire, and they think that we have been destroyed and forgotten." Replied Grayson.

We entered a large atrium, littered with Warthogs, M808B Scorpion Tanks, and shelves full of firearms. A label posted on the door read "Armory."

The armory was a huge room, easily half a kilometer long, with two floors that were connected by a large staircase that hugged the right wall. Several LRV Warthogs, M274 Mongooses, and M808B Scorpion Tanks were parked around the room, with some disassembled and their parts scattered across the floor. Metal racks were built into the walls, and an endless amount of weapons lay upon them.

"We have grown strong while they grow weak; and we have not been forgotten." Finished Grayson as we gazed at the contents of the Armory.

"Come." Called Grayson as he strode through the room.

We followed in silence, more confused than ever before as we struggled to grasp the General's words. Were they training us to help them in their rebellion against the strongest human empire known to mankind?

After a while we entered thebridge, which was a large room with two floors occupied with more crew members and computers. A large window formed the wall in front of us, allowing us to see the sea of space beyond. Grayson stood proudly in the center of the room as if he had done so a hundred times before. He nodded to a techie beside him, who nodded back and pushed a key on his computer.

Suddenly, a large monitor dropped from the ceiling and flashed alive, beginning to playback a selected video feed. The black screen morphed into the image of a battlefield, with large UNSC frigates soaring in the twilight sky as explosions dented the rocky soil. A large soldier wearing dark green armor ran into view, his gold visor reflecting the sun's light and temporarily blinding the screen. The soldier raised his BR-55 Battle Rifle and fired a burst at an unseen enemy, before sprinting forward and out of view. Almost instantly, four other green armored soldiers ran after him, weapons raised as they prepared to follow their leader to hell and back if needed. Static began to cover the screen as the camera slowly began to die, the final seconds of video feed showing a battalion of UNSC soldiers running behind the green warriors, their rifles ablaze.

The video began to rewind, back to the image of the green armored soldier. I stared in silence, my breath quickening as I realized what I was looking at.

Spartan.

"That, is your target." Spoke Grayson as he pointed at the monitor.

We remained silent, completely shocked.

"I think I just shit myselfâ€|" I heard Gizmo say behind me.

"wâ€|what?" stammered Boss, putting everyone's thoughts into words. He wasn't serious, was he? Expecting a group of teenagers to take down a UNSC Spartan-II soldier is like expecting a fly to take down a fucking lion!

"We've been at war with the UNSC ever since they first rose to power. For decades we have been in a deadlock, with either side unable to gain an advantage over the other. Sadly, that has changed dramatically. Our war had forced the UNSC to drastic measures, and the birth of the Spartans. Now we have been forced into hiding, while the Spartans hunt our commanders each day. The UNSC has forced our hand, and now we too, have turned to drastic measures."

"Us." I muttered aloud.

"We needed to even the playing field; we needed Spartans of our own."

"You can't seriously expect us to kill Spartans!" Tiger shouted. The Spartans were legendary, and known for their ferocity on the battlefield and their habit of never dying. Spartans never die; that was their credo.

"Of course I do. You will be Spartans trained to kill Spartans." Concluded Grayson.

"Sir, we have a problem!" shouted a techie as he turned to Grayson.

"Report." Replied the General as he acknowledged the man immediately.

Suddenly the floor shifted violently, and the bridge went dark as the lights and computers were shut off. Chatter in the room escalated as the crew frantically tried to figure out what had happened.

"Report! Someone tell me what the hell is going on!" I heard Grayson shout nearby.

"The whole ship is dark, sir! We believe we've been hit by an Electro-Magnetic Pulse!" came a reply from elsewhere in the room.

"EMPâ€|" muttered Grayson. A few seconds later, the lights flashed back to life and the computers began to reboot.

"Backup Generators were able to successfully restart the _Oath_, sir; we're back online!" reported the techie as he returned to his post.

"Enemy contact inbound! It's a frigate, sir!"

"Weapons systems and MAC cannons are still offline, sir! We're unable to retaliate if fired upon! We're dead in the water!"

"Enemy boarding parties have reached the hangar bay!"

The shouts of the crew flooded the room, pouring an overload of problems onto Grayson.

"Attack from who? Covenant? UNSC? What are we dealing with?" asked Grayson, his face calm as he began to handle the situation.

"Switching monitor to security camera 13-A, take a look yourself, general." Came a reply as the monitor flashed alive again, portraying an image of the hangar bay we had been in minutes ago. The hangar was engulfed in gunfire as the LF soldiers fought to keep control of the hangar. One by one the troops were killed, and the hangar was silent again as a pack of soldiers wearing black combat vests and gas masks reloaded their weapons and advanced into the ship.

"Insurrectionists." Muttered Grayson as he watched the screen.

"What? Why would insurrectionists be attacking fellow rebels?" I asked, confused.

"Not all insurrectionists agree with the Liberation's goals and motives. Rival rebels have chosen to defy us rather than join us." Replied Grayson. He turned to a soldier beside him, "gather the troops onboard the _Oath _and alert Ragnarok to our situation. We'll intercept them in the corridors and hold out until reinforcements arrive from Vessius. We-"

A loud explosion rocked the ship as we fell to the ground, an ear splitting ringing echoing through my ears.

"They fired MAC rounds; multiple hull breaches in the engine room and the rear of the ship! Main thrusters are crippled and unresponsive! We can't take much more of this, commander!" shouted a technician, fear showing in his voice.

"Innies are advancing towards the bridge, we can't mount an effective defensive; squads 9 and 14 are dead. We can't stop them and more of them are coming aboard as we speak! We're losing the _Oath_!" reported another tech.

Another explosion shook the deck as Grayson stood in silence, his face grim. "Gather our remaining forces and send them here; we'll mount a defense here."

"Yes sir!" shouted the LF soldiers as they saluted the general, then ran out of the bridge.

"As long as the Spartans are with me, they are in danger. Take the Spartans and head to the escape pods; if they are killed, it will be their blood on your hands." Grayson ordered to the remaining soldiers in the room. They saluted, and motioned for us to follow them, splitting the ten of us into two groups to maximize safety. Trying to stay as calm as I could, I ran behind Boss, Princess, Sage, Zeke, and the three soldiers leading us out of the bridge and into the corridor beyond.

We jogged down the corridor after the soldiers, too shocked for words. Everything was happening so fast that our minds hadn't had time to process any of it.

The three soldiers stalked down the corridors, their MA5B assault rifles swaying back and forth as they searched for any threat.

"This is a code-red alert! We are under attack! All Liberation Soldiers onboard report to the bridge immediately! This is not a drill!" echoed Grayson's voice through the corridors speakers.

We entered the Armory again, and noticed that most of the weapons on the shelves were missing. I spotted Zeke grab a M6D Magnum from one of the shelves and stuff it in his pocket. Seeing his logic, I did the same. Better safe than sorry.

We hurried through the room as distant explosions rocked the ship and Grayson's alert replayed itself. The soldiers halted us, quickly hearing the sound of gunfire coming from beyond the door ahead of us.

"This way!" shouted one of the soldiers as he pointed towards a door on the second floor of the armory. We ran up a set of stairs leading up to the second floor, the soldiers staying below as they covered our backs. As we reached the top of the stairs, a thunderous explosion shattered the armory door below, fire and debris being shot through the air like shrapnel. With a shout we hit the deck, a large piece of debris impacting the wall a few feet beside me.

We watched as a pack of insurrectionists rushed into the armory, spotting the three LF soldiers in front of the staircase and opening fire immediately. The soldiers, dazed and disoriented from the explosion, were cut down, their bodies dropping to the floor.

With a curse Zeke grabbed a MA5B from a nearby self and took aim at the insurrectionists below, who were helping themselves to the weaponry and ammo in the room.

"No!" I whispered as I grabbed and lowered his gun, "don't shoot; you'll put us all at risk!"

Zeke jerked the rifle from my grip and pointed it towards me, his finger firmly on the trigger. I raised my hands in surrender, a chill racing up my spine. Boss grabbed Zeke's shoulder, causing him to freeze.

"Not here." She said, her face firm.

Zeke lowered the rifle, but kept his burning gaze on me. Goddamn if looks could kill.

"We need to get to the escape pods and get the hell off this ship." Spoke Boss as we crouched, trying to stay out of the Innies sight.

"Without getting killed." Added Sage.

"Exactly."

Boss scanned the second floor, spotting a door on the far

wall.

"That's our way out of here; let's see where it leads." She finished as she grabbed a rifle from the wall. "I'm on point."

4. I: Honor Team

Chapter IV: Honor Team

September 14, 2549 (Estimated Military Time) \ Onboard the
*Oath of Repentance. ***Vessius, Paris System. **

"We need to regroup with Tiger and the others, and then we can try to take back the _Oath_." Ordered Boss, an MA5B firmly in her hands.

"You really think that ten kids can take back a ship from a group of highly-trained killers?" asked Sage, doubtful.

An hour had passed since we were brought aboard the _Oath of Repentance_ and all hell broke loose. From what we could gather from the radio transmissions from the corridor speakers, the hostile takeover had gone from bad, to worse, to goddamn ugly. Grayson and his remaining forces had hunkered down in the bridge, using it as their last line of defense in hopes that reinforcements would arrive before the insurgents broke in and massacred them. We had also heard a transmission a few minutes ago, stating that Liberation reinforcements were unable to reach the ship, due to the rebel frigate nearby. The rebels' goal was clearly to secure the ship and capture Grayson, which was obvious since they hadn't blown the _Oath_ to kingdom come already. The ship was entirely under insurgent control, excluding the bridge, and we could gather no info on the status of the other five Spartan candidates.

At first our plan was to continue heading towards the escape pods, but quickly realized that it was a terrible idea. If I was the enemy and my goal was to secure VIPs on the ship, the very first thing I would do is cut off all escape routes. We quickly realized that we were stuck on this ship. To Sage's dismay, we had only one option; find a way to regroup with the other candidates and attempt to either take back the ship from the rebels.

Sage strongly believed that we were fucked, and I don't blame her for thinking that; she believed that there was no way in hell ten kids being raised to become Spartan super-soldiers and undergoing five years of intense training could reclaim a ship from a group of organized rebels. In MY opinion, as long as Zeke and I were equipped with any kind of firearm and given no specific orders on how to complete our mission; anything was possible.

"Boss, we need to keep moving." I warned, watching the door leading out of the cabin we were hiding in.

After leaving the armory, we had stumbled into the ships gymnasium, which was built into the west wall of the frigate and had a large windowed wall that displayed the starry ocean beyond. With some help from a holographic map located in the center of the room, we made our way south, towards the Emergency Station Alpha. After passing through the Crew Quarters without confrontation, we had managed to make it to

the large door leading into the station. Boss, Zeke, and I had peered into the window on the door, trying to look into the station and see what kind of threat we were dealing with.

The Emergency Station was missing; literally. According to Zeke, the insurgents must have known the exact layout of the Oath, and one of the explosions we had heard earlier was a MAC round impacting directly with the Alpha Station. The station was blown clean off the frigate, and was currently floating around in space a colony of debris. The metal door we had been standing behind was the only thing between us and the vacuum of space.

We had decided to head back to the Crew Quarters and hide there until we could come up with another plan.

"Ok look," started Princess as she opened a map that she had found on a desk in the cabin. "The emergency stations that house the escape pods are located on both sides of the ship. The soldiers we were following were leading us to the pods on the west side of the ship, while Tiger and the others were being led to the pods on the east side."

"So we need to make it to the other side of the ship without being killed? That doesn't sound so bad." Remarked Zeke as he glanced at the map.

"There's a catch; we don't know if Tiger and the others were able to get to the escape pods before they were disabled, or if they're even on the ship anymore. Furthermore, we'd have to find a way to take the ship back and rescue Grayson, without the insurgents alerting their frigate and blowing us all to oblivion."

"â€œOh" muttered Zeke, his hopes somewhat crushed.

"No pressure." I added, doubtful.

Boss nodded and stood, walking to the door and raising her rifle. We immediately followed her lead, preparing for whatever lies behind the door.

"We're heading east; regrouping with the others is our highest priority." Ordered Boss, her face firm.

With that, she opened the cabin door, her rifle swinging from left to right as she searched for any threat. She took a left, leading into a long empty hallway leading deeper into the ship. I followed close behind her, with Sage and Princess breathing down my neck, and Zeke covering the rear.

We silently stalked down the hall, careful not to make any noise and give away our position. I glanced to the left wall, instinctively keeping track of the room numbers on the cabin doors as we passed by. 120, 119, 118, 117â€œ!

We followed the hall until it led back to the door leading into the gymnasium. Boss called a halt when we reached the door, and we all crouched immediately. Boss gave me a nod, and I put my back against the door, sliding my body upwards as I turned my head and peered into the gymnasium.

The gymnasium wasn't empty anymore; crates full of ammo were scattered everywhere and six insurrectionist soldiers patrolled the room. Four of the soldiers were armed with MA5B rifles, one was armed with an M90 shotgun, and the last soldier had a M41 Rocket Launcher slung over his shoulder.

"Uhâ€|we have a problem." I reported as I stared at the rocket launcher, envisioning it blowing my body into a mist of blood, organs, and flesh.

"Shit!" remarked Boss as I moved away from the door and let her peer inside the gym.

"We don't have a choice, we have to get through that room; there's no turning back now." Muttered Zeke as he glanced into the room.

"Going in there guns blazing would be suicide; one well aimed shot with that rocket launcher and we're all dead!" spoke Princess.

"Someone would have to take out that launcher before he can fire it, but that would be suicide too; the other soldiers would cut the runner down in seconds." Replied Boss, her voice grim. We all grew silent, trying to come up with a better plan.

"I'll do it." I said, my mind made up. Zeke made eye contact with me for the first time since we've been on the Oath, and I could tell that he was completely surprised.

"Van, are you sure?" asked Boss, her voice shaky.

"I'll make a dash for the rocket launcher; the second I open the door you need to put down cover fire or I'm fucked." I said.

The others nodded, their rifles raised. I nodded; not to them, but to myself. I had accepted the possibility of dying years ago. Death was only the beginning; and the quickest way out of this hellhole I call a life.

I raised my MA5B and took a deep breath, drowning my fear and clearing my conscience.

Last one out, get the lights.

I unlocked the door and kicked it open, immediately dropping into a sprint towards the insurgent that stood a couple meters away. Almost instantly all eyes in the room were on me, and time seemed to slow down as their guns hovered in the air, slowly turning towards me. I could hear my heart pounding in my chest like a drum; feel my chest as it rose and fell with each breath; feel the muscles in my legs flex and tighten as I pushed my body to move faster.

I could scarcely hear the shouts of Boss and Zeke as they charged into the room, rifles ablaze as they sent bullets flying everywhere. The insurgents had no choice but to duck behind the ammo crates, buying me precious seconds. I continued to sprint forward, towards the one insurgent ahead who was beginning to raise his rocket launcher. At the sight of the firearm I threw myself into another burst of speed, realizing that in a few moments I would be nothing more than a puddle of guts on the floor.

I was beyond focused; I don't know why. Maybe it was the fact that any moment I could be shot from all sides, or blown to smithereens. Maybe it was because I wanted to impress Sage. Maybe it was because I wanted Zeke to know that he wasn't the only one who could put his life on the line in the blink of an eye.

Nothing else mattered right now except for reaching the insurgent. I blocked out everything; the sharp whistle as a bullet flew past my head, the curses of the insurrectionists as they traded pot shots with Zeke and the others, the stinging in my chest as my lungs struggled to keep up.

As I came closer and closer to my target, an insurgent nearby turned to me and opened fire, sending flashes of yellow light towards me as bullets flew past my head. I tried to ignore the fact that I was under fire, and continued to push towards my target.

I suddenly felt a sharp pain in my left arm, and I shouted in pain as I realized that I had been shot. In seconds my arm went numb and dropped to my side, useless now. With my arm numb, I lost all feeling in my hand, causing me to drop my MA5B. I cursed, but continued sprinting; I couldn't go back for the gun, I wouldn't have enough time.

I was a few feet away from the insurgent with the rocket launcher, who had successfully loaded his M41 and aimed it at my skull. I could see his finger press down on the trigger. It was all over.

Then, a miracle happened. I watched in shock as a yellow flash impacted with the insurgent and dug itself into his shoulder. The insurgent cursed and lowered his arm, causing him to drop the M41 and grab his shoulder in pain. The insurgent that had been firing at me had accidentally shot his own comrade. Friendly fire for the fucking win!

With a yell I tackled the insurgent, knocking him off his feet as inertia kept me moving forward. The insurgents back slammed against the ammo crate behind him, which slid backwards a couple inches by our momentum. I let go of the insurgent and stood, exhausted, as the insurgent below me struggled to breathe. Before he could get up I took the M6D Magnum from my pocket and took aim. I fired, watching as my hand jerked backwards four times and four holes appeared in the insurgent's armored vest.

I caught my breath, still in shock. I had just charged at an insurrectionist armed with a M41 Surface-to-Surface Anti-Tank/Anti-Infantry Rocket Launcher, holding nothing but a MA5B and a M6Dâ€ and survived. That's like killing a ferocious man-eating lion with a paper clip!

Realizing that I was still in a firefight, I quickly ran behind the ammo crate and took cover.

I don't know what caused me to do it, but I took the time to read the writing on the ammo crate; something that could have gotten me killed easily:

7.62 caliber stun rounds

WARNING: upon contact, chemicals infused in bullet point seep into the blood stream, causing temporary numbness and paralysis.

Liberation Front: Branch of Technical Advancements (BTA)

Division 7, Section Three

ID: 61524316

"Van!" I heard Sage shout from across the room. I peered over the top of the crate to see the five other insurgents motionless on the floor, bullet wounds scattered across their vests. The firefight was already over?

"I'm ok." I replied as I stood and walked back to the others, glancing at the small bullet wound in my left arm. It wasn't bleeding yet, but the skin was tender.

Sage and Princess rose from cover, while Zeke and Boss walked up to me, relieved that I was still alive.

"You were hit!" shouted Boss as she spotted my wound, grabbing my arm instantly.

"Boss I'm fine! I can't even feel it!" I replied, backing away from her slightly. "You two did a damn good job covering me."

"You should be thanking Sage, not us; she's the one that took down three of the insurgents and covered you the most. The rest of us were busy trying to keep from getting our heads blown off." Said Boss as she turned to look at Sage. Sage remained silent, her face red as she blushed furiously.

"Thanks. I owe you one." I said as I smiled at her, causing her to blush even more.

"We need to keep moving, that firefight most likely alerted other rebels nearby." Stated Zeke as he dropped his MA5B and picked up one of the M90 lying on the floor.

"Alright, let's go." Ordered Boss as she headed towards the door leading into the armory, with the rest of us close behind. I took a look back at the ammo crates, feeling uneasy as I wondered what they were doing here and what they meant. Stun roundsâ€!

Of course there were insurgents in the armory too. Twelve in all, all armed with whatever weapons they could find in the armory.

I turned away from the armory door, lowering in a squat as I sighed, "It never endsâ€|"

Zeke pushed me aside as he peered into the room, looking for any kind of advantage for us. Goddamn this guy was really starting to piss me off.

"There's a Warthog parked a few meters away from the door; if I can get to it without alerting the insurgents, I could get on the LAAG and lay down cover fire, while the rest of you enter the room and mow down whoever is left standing." Spoke Zeke.

"It's not the best plan, but it's better than nothing." Sighed Boss. I could tell she didn't like the plan at all.

"Wait. I'll go instead." I spoke up, looking directly at Boss.

"Fuck that. You've already put your life on the line; I won't let you do it again." replied Zeke as he glared at me. His reason sounded innocent enough, but I knew there was a deeper reason to why Zeke objected to me going instead.

"Fine." I muttered, not wanting to anger him again.

"Be careful, okay?" spoke Princess as she embraced him. They kissed for what seemed like an hour, which caused me to avert my eyes in disgust. Those two fucking lovebirds are going to get us killed one day I swearâ€!

Zeke took a breath, opened the door, and slipped through and out of sight. We sat there, silent and nervous as we tried to hear inside the armory. We were listening for any sign, any clue that would suggest that Zeke had been discovered.

I slapped a fresh mag into my M6D and sighed, closing my eyes and waiting for the eminent sound of gunfire.

"You should stay here until we've cleared the room again." I heard Boss say.

"Okay." I heard Princess whisper, her voice shaky from concern for Zeke.

That's when I realized something; Princess didn't participate in the firefight in the gymnasium; Zeke wouldn't have let her, in fear that she would get shot or worse. He was protecting her from everything, and unknowingly turning her into an outcast.

Zeke, Boss, Sage, Me; we were all prepared to dive into combat and risk our lives every minute, but Princess was different. She wasn't Spartan material, and everyone, including herself, knew it. She would never be able to do what is necessary to complete the mission; to kill. She wasn't nearly as heartless as we were, and it made her an outcast. Zeke had been trying for five years to protect her, not from danger, but from the world itself. He had tried all he could to convince Grayson to disband her from the Spartan IV program, but to no avail. She was stuck; a lover among the heartless.

The sharp screech of gunfire snapped me from my thoughts. I was instantly on my feet, M6D held firmly in my right hand as Boss prepared to open the armory door.

"I'm on point. Sage; take the right flank. Van; take the left."

I looked back at Sage, who had her rifle raised and ready for action. I turned back to Boss, who was counting down with her free hand.
3â€|2â€|1

Boss flung open the door and we charged into the room. I immediately turned to the left, spotting three insurgents behind a row of warthogs as Zeke continued to pound their cover with the LAAG. Four

insurgents were already on the floor, motionless, blood seeping from their bodies. Zeke had been busy.

I crouched and pulled the trigger four times, flinching as the pistols recoil rocked my shoulder. My first two shot missed, but my third and fourth impacted with an insurgent's chest, causing him to fall backwards and onto the rear of the Warthog.

I watched as Zeke spotted an insurgent trying to flee from the room, and opened fire with the LAAG. The Heavy Machine Guns 12.7x99mm armor piercing rounds ripped the insurgent's body to shreds, causing his intestines to drop to the floor. Brutal way to go.

The last insurgent taking cover behind the warthogs fired a burst at Zeke, forcing him to abandon the LAAG and dive for cover. I moved towards the warthogs to flank the insurgent, who was too busy taking pot shots at Zeke. With a grin I aimed at his head, feeling the Magnum kick in my hand as the insurgent's helmet was knocked clean off his head, blood splattering across the back of the warthog.

I turned to my right in time to see Boss fire a burst of ammo into the chest of the last standing insurgent, who dropped to the floor in a heap. Twelve bodies lay on the floor now, and none of them Spartan candidates.

"Nice job." I said to Zeke as he walked by me, probably to go retrieve Princess.

"I don't need your fucking praise." He growled in response. I tried to ignore it, but I couldn't anymore.

"What the fuck is your problem? We're in a fucking combat situation and instead of cooperating you've been acting like a complete asshole! I get it, you're still pissed about me and Princess; but get the fuck over it! It doesn't matter now! If you can't let shit go and get along with everyone else, you're going to get us all killed; including Princess!" I shouted, speaking out of anger more than thought.

Zeke stopped immediately, and I prepared for a fight. With my left arm wounded and useless, a confrontation with Zeke would only lead to a severe ass kicking.

Zeke turned to me, his eyes burning with rage. I had seen that look many times before.

He started walking towards me, his fists clenched and the veins pulsing. Here we goâ€¢

"You're my problem Van, you've always been. You act like you're here to protect everyone; carelessly putting your life on the line just to prove a point. You parade around here like you're the best of us; the smartest, the strongest, the fastest. But you're not, Vanguard, and you'll never be. You think you've suffered, you think you know pain; but you know nothing. You're just a dog, Van, a dog driven by nothing but instincts. You're incapable of thought, all you know is what your instincts tell you to know. You're a mindless animal among humans, and you try to convince everyone that you're more than that." Growled Zeke, each word getting me more and more enraged.

"Shut the fuck up.." I warned him, anger blurring my vision.

"The fact that you think you're better than me pisses me off. You think that just because your daddy sold you to rebels because he never loved you, that you know suffering. You don't. I had to watch as my entire family was slaughtered by the Liberation, and was powerless to intervene as Grayson dug a bullet into my mother's brain. I have to salute to him, the man that murdered my mother, EVERY FUCKING DAY! That, is suffering; and until you realize that, then you're nothing but a mindless waste of life." finished Zeke.

I was beyond enraged; too angry to even speak. Zeke came closer, raising his fists and preparing to tear my face in. I gripped the M6D tightly and aimed it at his skull, completely at peace with the fact that I was about to murder an old friend.

Suddenly a hand gripped the M6D and pushed it downward, along with my arm. I turned and saw Boss beside me, her face emotionless. She used her free hand to grip the back of my neck and continued to swing my arm down, causing my head to lower as she bent me over. She pushed upward with the hand subduing my arm, and pushed down with the hand on my neck. My feet rose off the ground as I was lifted into the air, doing a front flip and crashing back down onto the floor on my back. I lay there, dazed, as stars began to fly across my vision.

I groaned in pain as I watched Boss turn to Zeke next. He took a swing towards her face, which she ducked under immediately. Boss rammed her elbow into Zeke's chest and lifted him into the air, causing him to do an unintended front flip and land on his back as well.

In less than a minute, Boss had managed to outmatch both me AND Zeke.

"We all calm now?" she asked.

* * *

><p>We had taken the east door out of the armory, towards Emergency Station Delta. The armory led directly into Drop Bay, a place filled with gear for orbital engineering. Spacesuits, air masks, jet packs, and oxygen tanks were organized across the walls. A large door lay across the room, leading towards the Station beyond.</p>

"Whoa, look at all this space gear!" exclaimed Sage as she gazed around the room.

"Guys, we may have a problem." I said as I peered through the door leading towards the Delta Station.

The only thing between the Drop Bay and the Delta Station was a long corridor, which must have been hit by a MAC round during the hostile takeover. The left wall of the corridor was completely blown apart, exposing the entire corridor to the vacuum of space.

"Is that corridor our only way across?" asked Sage.

"Looks that way." I replied. I turned to Boss, "Orders?"

"You ever walked through space before?" she asked as she held a

spacesuit, smiling.

* * *

><p>"For the record, I do not think this is a good idea." I said as I practiced moving around in the thick spacesuit I was wearing. It was heavy, and it took a lot of energy just to walk. The oxygen tank hooked to my back must have weighed forty pounds, and the helmet I had to wear was beginning to hurt my neck.</p>

"Duly noted, now get moving." I heard Boss reply, her voice echoing through my helmet as it came from the COMM link built into it.

I took a deep breath and pulled down a switch on the CPU in front of me, causing the screen to change and read "_lowering oxygen levels: 99%_."

When the countdown reached 0%, the door leading into the corridor swung open without a sound, a clear indication that the Drop Bay was completely purged of all air.

As Boss had explained earlier, if we had opened the door before we had vented the Drop bay of air, the air would have been sucked out of the room and into space at over 300mph, carrying us along with it and leaving us stranded in space; which is definitely not good.

I took another deep breath and began to walk through the corridor, hearing the loud thud of my boots as they hit the floor. I was careful to go slowly; one mistake and my boots would demagnetize from the floor and send me hurtling into space. I didn't even try to look back to see how the others were doing, for fear of losing my balance. We were in a whole new type of battle; a battle against space itself.

I tried to clear my mind and focus on reaching the door a few yards ahead of me. I tried not to look to my left and into the vastness of space; it was too surreal to think that I was this close to nothingness. As if in response to the thought of NOT doing it, I had taken a slight glance to the left, spotting the stars beyond and a lone Pelican drifting a few miles away from the _Oath_. Weird; where was the rebel frigate? Why was a Pelican watching the _Oath_? I decided that whatever was going on, it wasn't important; the only thing that mattered right now was not dying.

I started to shake and tremble, chills racing through my body as I began to panic. I was beyond afraid, and I was beginning to make small mistakes here and there out of fear.

As I reached the middle of the corridor, I made a fatal mistake. As I was bringing my left foot up to step forward, I had miscalculated the positioning of my right foot, causing them to collide. I tripped and began to fall, my feet lifting off the floor. Instead of falling down, I began to rise, being lifted up by the vacuum of space and into the star ocean. I was beyond freaking out; my arms and legs flailing as I yelled and shouted in panic.

"Vanguard!" I heard Boss shout through the COMM as I began to drift away. This was itâ€‘I was going to die.

I felt a hand grab mine and pull me back into the corridor, and I was

completely surprised to see who it was.

Zeke!

Zeke easily pulled me back into the hall, giving me a chance to let my boots magnetize with the floor before letting go of me. I stared at him, in complete shock. A few minutes ago, I had held a gun at this guy's head, ready to pull the trigger and end his life; why would he save my life?

"Let's go" was all he said as he continued walking behind the others, leaving me completely speechless.

* * *

><p>"Holy shit, are we glad to see you guys!" shouted Tiger as we entered the Delta Station. He looked like hammered shit; his uniform was covered in blood and what looked like oil or gas, and his MA5B was missing an ammo magazine. I spotted Hercules, Mist, and Blackjack sitting in a nearby warthog, and Gizmo operating a computer in the station control center. Several bodies were scattered around the station, both insurgent and Liberation soldiers.</p>

"I thought I'd never see your ugly face again, Tiger!" I replied with a smile. He laughed.

"What the hell happened to you guys?" asked Boss, beyond curious.

"When we left the bridge, the soldiers we were following led us here, for extraction; but we had arrived too late. We ended up rushing into a room full of innies, and the soldiers were cut down without a fight. We barely made it out of here alive, and ran back into the armory, where we stocked up on weapons and decided to take a warthog out for a little joyride. We drove back into the station and killed all the innies; you should've seen them falling like ragdolls when they were hit by the LAAG. Gizmo checked the computers to see what happened to the escape pods; turns out this ship was never even outfitted with escape pods in the first place!"

Gizmo decided that it would be a good idea to head down into the engine room, so that he could repair the ships engines and get us moving again. Turns out the engine room was completely intact and unharmed, and that the ship was capable of moving the entire time!" reported Tiger.

"That doesn't make any sense; back in the bridge one of the techies had reported hull breaches in the engine room." Spoke Boss, confused.

She was right; nothing about this hostile takeover seemed to make any sense. First the crates of stun rounds, then the missing enemy frigate and the lone pelican stalking the ship, and now the engines being fully functional. This was a puzzle that was missing some very important piecesâ€¦!

"None of that matters right now. We need to head to the bridge and rescue Grayson; he's our ticket out of here." Said Zeke from behind me, obviously losing his patience.

"He's right." Agreed Tiger, who shouldered his MA5B. "But I'm afraid we won't be much help without any ammo and the warthog is out of fuel."

"Come on, we'll stop by the armory to restock before we head for the bridge." Replied Boss as she walked towards the door leading back through the engine room and into the hangar bay.

Alright! I thought as I grabbed my M6D again. Time to rescue Grayson and get off this god forsaken ship!

* * *

><p>We had made it to the armory without any insurgent confrontation, the rest of them probably hunkered down in the bridge and waiting for us to arrive. Tiger, Hercules, Mist, Blackjack, and Gizmo had stocked up on 7.62 rounds while I traded my M6D for a M7 Submachine Gun. I had never fired an SMG one handed before, but I was more than eager to give it a try.</p>

"Everybody ready?" asked Boss as she stood in front of the north door, leading towards the bridge. We all nodded in agreement. Let's finish this.

Boss kicked open the door and rushed into the corridor, with Tiger to her left flank and me to her right. I immediately spotted an insurgent coming out of a door on the right side wall and opened fire, cursing as the SMG kicked upwards in my hands. The burst from the SMG made a beeline up the insurgent's chest and to his neck, causing him to drop immediately.

Two more insurgents entered the corridor and opened fire, making all of us crouch to avoid being hit. I could hear Zeke behind me pump the M90 and fire, knocking one of the insurgents back a couple meters as the slugs impacted with his chest. Boss and Tiger let loose on the last insurgent, dropping him in a hail of 7.62 rounds. We reloaded and continued down the hallway, towards the large door leading into the bridge.

Suddenly, a small metal can was thrown into the hall and slid towards us.

"Flashbang!" I shouted as the can exploded in a flash of extreme light, temporarily blinding me. I cursed as I stumbled to the floor, a sharp ringing in my ears. I closed my eyes to try to keep them from stinging, but to no avail.

I could hear the shouts of the other behind me as they opened fire, their guns barking and sending quakes of pain through my ears. I began to blink my eyes rapidly, trying desperately to regain my eyesight and rejoin the fight.

After a minute of trying, I finally regained my sight, and looked around. Four more insurgents lay motionless in front of us, failing to cut us down while we were stunned.

I heard shouts behind me and looked back, spotting Zeke lying on the floor with his head in Princess's hands. I looked down and noticed that his uniform had three holes in the chest area, and quickly realized that they were bullet wounds.

"Shit!" I cursed as I stumbled to Zeke's side, watching helplessly as he shook in pain. I looked up to see Princess crying over him, her tears falling onto his face.

Zeke was in extreme pain; his breaths came in short bursts as he closed his eyes in pain, his teeth bared. I was scared; I didn't want Zeke to die, I never did. I knew I would've never pulled the trigger back in the armory, and I always thought of Zeke as a close friend; and it took seeing him on the floor dying, for me to realize that.

"Vanâ€|Vanâ€|Vanguard!" shouted Boss nearby, snapping me out of my shock. I looked up at her.

"We need to keep moving!" she shouted, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me to my feet.

"I'm sorry." I said as I made eye contact with Zeke, feeling his pain through his gaze.

Boss continued towards the bridge as I followed behind her; with Tiger, Hercules, and Gizmo close behind me. The rest had decided to stay behind with Zeke, trying to keep him stable until we could find him some medical help.

We reached the end of the corridor and the door leading into the bridge, ready to charge in guns blazing.

To our surprise the door opened automatically, revealing the contents of the bridge and causing our jaws to drop.

The bridge was exactly as it was when we had left it, completely unharmed. Only one person stood in the bridge, clapping and smiling as we entered the room.

Grayson.

"Well done Spartans, well done; you did a fantastic job." Spoke the general, his smile wide.

"What the fuckâ€|" I muttered as I stared at the man, in complete disbelief. He was suppose to be tied up right; and surrounded by a dozen insurgents pointing rifles at his headâ€|what the fuck was going on?

"You're probably wondering what's going on, so I'll fill you in. It was all a training exercise. ALL of it." Spoke Grayson.

The room was silent.

"Wâ€|whatâ€|did you just say?" asked boss. Saying that she was confused was a huge understatement.

"There was never an insurgent takeover, it was all staged; a test to see how you would fare in a real combat situation. The Oath was never really under attack and you were never truly in danger of dying." Continued Grayson.

"Never truly in danger- I WAS SHOT IN THE FUCKING ARM! ZEKE IS

BLEEDING OUT AS WE SPEAK!" I shouted, completely pissed. They fucked with us again.

Grayson retrieved a bullet from his pocket and held it up for us to see. "Caliber Stun Rounds. Every single firearm on this ship was loaded with stun rounds instead of live ammunition; except for the LAAGs, of course. We never expected you to use the LAAGs, a miscalculation that cost us the lives of at least ten personnel." Grayson remarked, his smile morphing into a frown.

"Stun rounds?" I muttered.

"You of all people should have known that you weren't actually firing live ammo, vanguard; the surveillance tape showed us that you were the only one to read the ammo crates in the gymnasium." Replied Grayson as he put the bullet away.

So that's why my arm was still numb...

"As for Zeke, medical personnel are on their way and should have him off the ship in less than ten minutes. He will be fine, I assure you." said Grayson.

"So you were watching us the entire time?" asked Boss.

"Not me, Thorn. He was patrolling the ship in a Pelican, keeping track of your progress and listening in on your conversations." Replied Grayson. That explained the lone Pelican I had seen earlier.

"You functioned as a team a lot better than we had predicted under pressure; I am very impressed. Teamwork is key if you are to survive as Spartans, and you have displayed your effectiveness under a strong leader. You are truly ready to become Spartans."

* * *

><p>"You wanted to see us, sir?" spoke Boss as we entered the Generals Office. It had been two days since our training exercise aboard the Oath of Repentance, and the first time in five years that Grayson had requested us to meet with him in private. Boss, Hercules, Zeke, Gizmo, and I stood firmly in front of the General, who was standing in front of us.

True to his word, Grayson had ordered for Zeke to be sent to the Medical Wing immediately upon arriving back at Ragnarok. In less than a hour they had removed the three stun rounds from his chest and bandaged him up, kicking him out of the Med Wing the very next day.

The medical personnel had decided to visit me again in the middle of the night, patching up my arm and drugging me with pain killers. Long story short, thorn proceeded to kick my ass again for sleeping through his morning alarm.

"We've been watching the five of you ever since your training began. You are the best candidates we have; each of you possessing a certain attribute that is essential to functioning as the perfect Spartan team. It is because of this that we are grouping the five of you into a permanent team. You will eat as a team, you will train as a team,

and you will succeed as a team. You are no longer five individuals; you are now one team of Spartan Elites, destined for greatness. Boss, Hercules, Vanguard, Zeke, Gizmo; welcome to Honor Team."

5. I: 91 Percent

Chapter V: 91%

December 20, 2552 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System. (Three years after the "____Oath of Repentance____" training exercise.)

Paris Daily News:

THE HUMAN-COVENANT WAR IS OVER!

UNSC soldiers return home after more than thirty years of war!

I closed the paper with a snort, balling it up and tossing it into the garbage.

"So it's true? The war is finally over?" asked Hercules before taking another bite of his hamburger.

"Does it matter? It doesn't affect us; not here." I quickly replied.

It was true; the war was finally over. Apparently, the last remaining Spartan, a badass named the Master Chief, had seriously kicked covenant ass when they decided to invade Earth. THEN, he had followed them through some huge, fucking portal to god knows where. And to top it all off, had managed to stop a massive flood invasion and helped the Arbiter slay the last remaining covenant leader AND a Gravemind. Talk about going above and beyond the call of duty!

"The guards are saying that the Chief never made it back to Earth; that he's probably dead and his body is drifting through space somewhere." Stated Gizmo beside me, gazing down at my tray of French Fries.

"Oh, that's terrible!" I muttered sarcastically. Gizmo quickly made a grab for my tray, forcing me to stab him in the hand with my fork.

"Ah! Motherfucker!" he wailed, trying to keep his hand from bleeding. I grinned.

The cafeteria was packed with children, marking the first time that all one hundred of the Spartan Candidates were allowed to eat dinner at the same time. The cooks had actually made food today; hamburgers, hotdogs, french fries, tacos, even ice cream! Hercules had brought back three plates full of food, inhaling all of it in less than ten minutes flat.

"This seat taken?" asked a tall Irish boy standing beside me, his curly red hair covering his eyes and a small goatee on his chin. He had no food on his tray; only four bottles of vodka.

"Ah, no." I answered, gazing at the boy as he sat down.

He was at least eighteen, six feet tall, and made of pure muscle; one time managing to hold his own in a wrestling match against Hercules. I didn't know much about him, but I did know that he had gotten in a fight with Thorn over a bottle of scotch he had in his locker, causing Grayson to acknowledge his Irish heritage and his lust for being drunk. Long story short, he was the only Candidate allowed to drink booze. The name "Lucky Joe" was printed on his uniform, probably a racist joke between the guards or something.

"Didn't I see you in the brig last night?" Gizmo asked Lucky, curious. I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if his answer was yes; this looked like an crazy Irishman.

"Aye. Thorn caught Bachelor and me fuckin some lassies in the training grounds; threw me in the brig after I picked a fight with him." Replied Lucky, popping open a bottle of vodka and taking a long gulp.

"Lovely!" I muttered, biting down on a hamburger.

"Don't you think stuff like that wouldn't happen if you were sober?" asked Gizmo.

Lucky began to laugh hysterically, spitting vodka all over the table. "You're funny, little man!"

I spotted Zeke walk by, a tray in each hand. I waved as he went passed, causing him to grin and nod at me. I watched him as he went, stopping at a table where Sage, Princess, and Boss sat. He gingerly handed Princess a tray, and I could see her lips move as she spoke the words thank you. He sat down, putting his arm over Princess as she began to eat.

Zeke and I had both settled our differences weeks after the training exercise on the Oath, both of us realizing that we were better as comrades than enemies. Over the years our friendship had strengthened, to the point where I would gladly take a bullet for him, trusting that he would do the same.

"Bloody hell; look at this mess!" shouted Tiger as he reached our table, gazing at the huge mess we had made. We all gave him a shrug.

With a sigh he took a seat next to Hercules, "So do you guys know what's going on?"

"No?" we all answered in unison, puzzled.

"You're fucking kidding me right? You're not wondering why we haven't had a training exercise or any training AT ALL this month? You're not wondering why, out of the blue, Grayson decided to throw us all this huge dinner for the first time in eight years? The fuck is wrong with you!" shouted Tiger in disbelief.

We remained silent, taking the time to put the clues together.

"Something's going on; and it's huge." Concluded Tiger.

As if on cue, Grayson and Thorn entered the cafeteria and walked onto the stage at the front.

"ATTENTION!" yelled Thorn, causing everyone in the cafeteria to drop what they were doing, stand, and salute. The room was immediately quiet.

"At ease. Are you enjoying your dinner, Spartans?" asked Thorn. I seriously think that's the first question he's ever asked that didn't make me shit my pants.

"Sir, yes sir!" we all shouted in unison, emotionless.

"I'm sure you're all wondering why we've given you all such a long break." started Grayson, drawing our attention towards him. "It's been my honor to train you all over the years, watching as you grew from fearful children to determined soldiers. Your training is complete! There is nothing more we can teach you. Now begins your second phase in becoming a true Spartan soldier. Tomorrow you will all be escorted to the medical bay, where you will undergo special augmentations to further strengthen your bodies and turn you into super-soldiers. It's not easy for me to say this, so I'll just come out with it; not all of you will survive the procedures, I'm afraid. Do not be fearful; as long as you are determined and strong, you will overcome and return to us as a Spartan!" concluded Grayson. He crisply saluted us, causing all of our jaws to drop. When he was finished he left the cafeteria, Thorn close behind.

The cafeteria remained silent as we all sat, letting what we had just heard sink in.

"Augmentations? What does he mean, Van?" asked Tiger, worried.

"I don't knowâ€|" I answered, lost in my own thoughts. Whatever it was, Grayson was sure that some of us wouldn't survive itâ€|someone was going to die.

"Heh, I'm definitely not gonna die in some goddamn surgery! Who knows, maybe you'll be the one to die, Vanguard! Ha ha ha!" laughed Lucky, taking another sip of his vodka.

After dinner we had all left for the Barracks, our stomachs full to the brim.

I walked into the barracks, spotting Bambi reading in his cot.

Bambi hadn't changed a lot over the years. He was the same age as me, 15, but still resembled that of a scrawny twelve year old. He was still a coward, often failing most of his exercises due to either his lack of strength or his fear ofâ€|well everything. People had learned to just leave him alone, no one wanting to be a bully and be punished by a taser to the ass.

"Oh, hi Vanguard." He said as he noticed me staring at him.

"Hey. Is that book any good?" I asked.

"Uh, yeah. It's about the beginning of the war, when we first made contact with the covenant on harvest. It's pretty fascinating." He replied, smiling.

"Oh...do you read a lot?" I asked, trying my hardest to ignore how awkward I felt.

"Not really, just this book. My father had given it to me before he left to fight in the war." he answered, his eyes dropping in sadness.

I remained silent, speechless. So many of us had been affected by the war in some way; it was only natural to keep mementos of those that we've lost. Hercules still kept the picture of his mother stuffed in his locker, taking it out to look at it for hours every night.

"Hey, Van; can I ask you a question?" asked Bambi suddenly, surprising me.

"Uh, yeah, sure." I replied.

"Do you fear death?"

I had put my life on the line so many times before, but never actually asked myself that question. Weird.

"No. death is just the beginning." I answered.

"The beginning of what?"

"Your journey." I replied, grinning.

Bambi became quiet, struggling to understand my answer.

"Get some sleep; we have a long day tomorrow." I said as I patted him on the back. He gave me a nod as I walked away, towards my own cot.

"Van!" I heard a girl shout somewhere nearby. Suddenly I was hugged by Sage, her hair splashing into my face and filling my nose with the smell of lavender.

"Oh..uhâ€|hi." I managed to say, my cheeks growing red.

She let me go, letting me gasp for air as she smiled, "Oops, sorry."

"It's ok." I laughed, catching my breath. "You seem excited."

"I am! Mist said that she heard one of the guards talking about how Grayson was going to let us go home after our augmentations! I can't wait to head back to Earth and see my baby sister and my mom again!" exclaimed Sage before hugging me again.

I immediately felt my heart sink. It wasn't true; we weren't going to leave and start a normal life after tomorrow. We were going to continue as Spartans, rushing from battle to battle. Sage didn't believe that; she couldn't accept the fact that our old lives were over. She was willing to believe anything if it meant that she could still hope of seeing her family again; and I wasn't going to be the one to shatter that hope. Not now.

"Uh, yeah." I replied. "Homeâ€|"

"I'm going to go pack; I'll see you later Van!" she said before running off, leaving me feeling like shit.

I crashed onto my cot, burying my head in my pillow and sighing.

"Tired much?" spoke Boss, sitting on her cot. I turned to her, grinning.

"No, my stomach hurts. It feels like grunts are in their having a birthday party or something!" I replied.

"A grunt birthday party?" she laughed, causing me to smile wider. "You really are something else, Vanguard."

"So you keep telling me." I replied.

Boss laid back in her cot, letting out a sigh.

"You ok?" I asked her, concerned.

"Our lives will change forever tomorrow; there's no going back." She muttered.

"The minute we set foot in this building there was no turning back." I remarked. "Everyone here has some kind of story or memory that keeps them going; what about you, Boss? What keeps you going?"

"This is what I wanted." She answered.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Ever since I was little I always wanted to be a soldier; someone who could protect the ones she loved no matter what. I didn't complain or protest when Grayson came to take me away. It was my dream to become a Spartan. That's what kept me going." She answered.

"I never knewâ€|" I muttered, surprised.

I looked back at Boss, who was fast asleep.

I grinned and buried my head back into my pillow, unable to resist as I was thrown into my dreams.

* * *

><p>I awoke with a yawn, the urge to pee growing every second. It was still nighttime, and everyone in the barracks was asleep. I slipped out of my cot quietly and headed for the door, opening it and stepping into the hallway beyond.</p>

I ran down the hallway, my bare feet making a soft thud as they touched the floor. I immediately stopped when I came to the door leading into Briefing Room A-12, hearing familiar voices inside. Curious, I snuck up to the door, sticking my ear against it as I listened in.

"The supplies and materials required to perform the augmentations cost the Liberation millions, Grayson! The Liberation is plummeting

into bankruptcy due to your training funds! If you continue to invest in your Spartan IV program, you will surely bring about the downfall of the Liberation Front!" I heard Doctor Hayter protest. She was in charge of the medical bay, often taking the time to bandage us up before we were sent on training exercises.

"Do you not see what we are accomplishing here? These children are the future of the Liberation! I would gladly sacrifice a hundred of our men in exchange for all of these candidates to survive the augmentations!" responded Grayson.

"But the augmentation data is incomplete! We don't know what the results will be, and how many will actually survive it! If we augment the candidates and none of them survive, we would have wasted years upon years and millions of dollars! You would have doomed us all!"

"The data is not incomplete, Hayter, it has been improved upon. If these children survive the augmentations they will be unstoppable; better than Spartan-II's in every way." Replied Grayson.

"You're putting the fate of the Liberation Front into these children's hands! If the augmentations fail!"

"THEY WILL NOT FAIL!" shouted Grayson. "Now go and prepare for tomorrow; we are done discussing this."

"Yes sir." I heard Hayter reply, defeated.

I quickly stepped away from the door, hearing footsteps coming from behind it. I quickly ran down the hallway and towards the bathrooms, trying to comprehend what I had just heard.

* * *

><p>"Van, it's time to go." I heard Boss say nearby, waking me. I yawned and slipped out of my cot, immediately noticing that everyone else was already up and dressed and waiting for the guards to escort us to the medical bay.</p>

I quickly put on a clean uniform and followed the others out of the Barracks, following the guards ahead.

"Nice to see that you're finally awake. You wouldn't want to sleep through this." Spoke Zeke, who walked up beside me.

"Course not." I answered with a grin.

"You nervous?" he asked, his eyes on me.

"A little. You?" I shot back.

"Nope; I can't be. If I was nervous, it would make Princess more nervous than she already is." He replied.

"I understand." I said.

We entered the medical bay and were quickly escorted into individual rooms, one hundred in all. I spotted princess up ahead, being led into her own room a few doors down from mine. She glanced at me and I

gave her a smile, which she returned before entering her room.

I slowly walked into my own assigned room, labeled **Subject 78**. Well that's not creepy at all.

The room was rather small. A counter was built into the far wall, and small cabinets were placed above it. Several machines were stacked on the left wall. A large, black, hospital bed sat in the center of the room. Beside the bed was a metal table, with all sorts of crap cluttering it. Large tubes filled with liquids sat on the table, along with medical tools, syringes, and bottles of medicine.

A blonde nurse entered the room and spotted me instantly, "ah, Vanguard; please, lay down on the bed."

I obeyed, walking over to the bed and climbing into it.

"So, what exactly are you going to do to me?" I asked, beyond curious.

"I'm going to inject you with a number of bio-chemical and bio-mechanical augmentations, which will hopefully increase your abilities tenfold. You will first be injected with Halcyon-19834, a chemical that will rapidly increase your bone structure and make your bones virtually unbreakable. Then you will be given a mutagen that will increase brain activity and blood flow, increasing your intelligence and heightening your senses. After that you will be given a special steroid, which will boost your muscle mass and increase your strength. The last augmentation you will receive is a liquid called Altarius-z44, which will cause your adrenal gland to produce twice as much adrenaline, causing you to be able to exert more energy and tire less." She replied as she took a syringe from off the table. Blue liquid swirled around inside the syringe.

"Are you ready?" she asked, putting a hand on my shoulder. I nodded.

"This is a heavy sedative; it should knock you out in a few seconds. I'll see you when you wake up." She said, before sticking the needle into my arm.

I instantly felt extremely drowsy, my eyelids drooping as I struggled to stay awake. I failed, and closed my eyes, drifting back to sleep.

* * *

><p>I don't remember the dream I had, but I remember how I felt during it. I was burning alive, melting away as the very blood in my body began to boil.</p>

* * *

><p>I awoke screaming, my skin burning as I began to spasm. It was unbearable; never before have I felt this kind of pain. My brain wouldn't work, the only thought racing through my mind was scream!</p>

"He's awake!"

"Hold him down!"

"Someone get that sedative!"

I screamed again, my body twitching as I cried in pain. I felt like dying; anything to stop this intense pain.

"KILL ME!" I heard myself shout, but my voice seemed so far away. I was beginning to black out, feeling myself fade into the afterlife as the pain ate away at my life. I began to gurgle, choking on my own saliva.

My eyes rolled into the back of my head and I fell limp, my mind plunging into eternal darkness.

* * *

><p>December 25, 2552 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System.

It was Christmas, a day to celebrate family and cherish life; ironic.

The cold wind blew across the land as the sun sat in the sky, basking the planet in a blanket of orange light. It was gloomy and silent, as if the planet itself felt our sorrow.

I stood at attention, saluting. My head was held high, but tears still managed to fall to the ground.

I had been extremely lucky; sometime during the augmentations I had went into cardiac arrest, dead for a full minute before the doctors were able to bring me back to life. I had survived; I was one of the lucky ones.

Behind me stood Grayson and Thorn, their heads bowed as they honored the dead. I was disgusted by them; acting as if they actually cared about what had happened. They knew no sadness, no sorrow.

Beside me stood Boss, her head buried in her hands as she wept. She had experienced multiple seizures during her augmentations, luckily surviving as well.

Next to Boss was Gizmo, who had surprisingly come out of the augmentations with little difficulties.

Hercules and Tiger stood silently, their heads bowed in prayer.

Beside them were Titan, Blackjack, and Winter; three people who I had hardly talked to at all in my years of training.

Last was Zeke, who was kneeling in front of a granite tombstone, his head resting on the stone. He had shed no tears, but everyone could tell he was beyond heartbroken.

I wiped my tears and walked over to my comrade, kneeling beside him and putting an arm on his shoulder. I tried not to look at the tombstone; it would cause me to have a complete meltdown.

Here Lies Sarah Hart,

A Spartan to the end.

"***Princess"**

Princess, Bambi, Lucky, Stranger, Bachelor, Mistâ€| Sage; gone. They were all dead.

I stood again, saluting to the granite tombstones that rose from the grass field ahead.

Ninety one tombstones stood in front of me, all above ninety one Spartans that rested forever below.

Ninety one percent of the Spartan candidates had been killed during augmentations. The Spartan IV program, was a failure.

6. I: Ascension

Section One

**Finale **

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><p>Chapter VI: Ascension

'_Honor is not earned; it is born in the hearts of heroes.'_-

The Credo of Honor Team

December 3, 2554 (Estimated Military Time) (Recorded In UNSC Central Database As "_____*The Siege of Vessius*____") \ Vessius, Paris System. (Two Years after Augmentations)

Walking into the Barracks everyday and seeing all the empty cots inside made my heart sink, reminded of the Spartans that lost their lives so many months ago.

Not a lot of time was spent mourning the dead, I know it sounds fucked up, but as soldiers we were raised to keep moving forward; dwelling on those that have perished only distracted us from the mission. We all held up a false face and tried our hardest to forget, but it was like a chunk was torn from our hearts. I often found Boss alone in the cemetery late at night, sobbing for hours. Our minds couldn't move on so quickly and our scars would heal over time, but never be forgotten.

Grayson had decided to clump together Tiger, Titan, Blackjack, and Winter into a single Spartan team; Valor Team. A mere week after the funeral, he had both Honor and Valor Team begin Post-Augmentation Therapy. We were the only Spartans he had left, and he didn't want such a great sacrifice to go to waste.

We had undergone therapy for two years, relearning how to operate our bodies and discovering how much stronger we had become. Hercules had grown three times as strong as he had been before, able to literally lift a Warthog with relative ease. Zeke's eyes had been enhanced

tremendously, and he was able to spot a target with elaborate detail up to a mile away. Gizmo's IQ had doubled, making him the smartest of us all, far surpassing the qualifications to be classified as a Genius. Tiger had become a master of stealth and espionage, able to slip through a hallway full of twenty alert guards without detection. How? I would never know. The change in our bodies had been great, super-human, but the cost to receive them wasn't even close to being justified. 91 good, brave children; lost.

And now the count is up to 95.

Two days ago Tiger had convinced Grayson to send Valor on their first assassination mission, and Grayson had cracked under pressure. The mission was simple; infiltrate a UNSC flagship, The Towering Blessing, and eliminate a UNSC Admiral suspected of listening in on Liberation communications. After the Admiral was killed they were to immediately exit the ship, hopping aboard a Liberation stealth ship and entering slipstream-space, successfully fleeing The Towering Blessing and completing their mission.

After a few hours of preparation they had left for their mission, leaving Honor Team completely unaware.

We never heard from them again.

We all knew that it was Grayson's fault that Tiger, Titan, Blackjack, and Winter were now dead. He had made a damn foolish decision to let them leave, one that he could have rejected like normal and saved the lives of four Spartans. They went in inexperienced, still learning how to use their new bodies, without proper armor, and without proper training. It was Grayson's fault that they were now dead, and everyone, him included, knew it.

Last night Grayson had been contacted by Lord Hood, leader of the United Nations Space Command and its armies. Hood had told Grayson that his Spartans had failed in their mission, unable to kill the Admiral and being captured before they could leave the ship. After eight hours of continuous torture the Spartans had broken, telling the UNSC Admiral everything about the Liberation, the Spartan IV Program, Grayson, and the locations of Vessius and Ragnarok. When asked about the status of the Spartans, Hood had replied that they were KIA, Killed In Action, stating that, "Such a waste of gods among men was saddening, and could have been avoided at your end." Hood announced to Grayson that a UNSC fleet was on its way to Vessius, prepared to siege the planet and lay ruin to Ragnarok, killing all rebels in their sight. "The creation of Spartan soldiers trained to harm the UNSC is an act of war, and we will react accordingly. Surrender immediately, or see you empire in flames." Hood had said. Grayson had replied saying that he had no intention of surrendering. Upon hearing this Hood had ended the call, the fall of the Liberation Front imminent.

And ever since Grayson had prepared for war, requesting all Liberation forces across the Milky Way to gather in Vessius. Three hours after he had given the order, seven frigates and over twenty pelicans had arrived, helping to fortify the planet and prepare for the coming battle. Three massive cruisers had entered the atmosphere a few hours ago, casting large shadows on the planet below.

Grayson had agreed to let us assist in the battle, saying that he was

reluctant at the risk of losing more Spartans, but he didn't really have a choice and needed as much help as he could find.

And so here I was, strapping on a suit of standard Liberation Front armor and grabbing an MA5B, my mind on edge as it tried to juggle all the events of the past days. I missed Tiger immensely, even expecting to see him walk towards our table in the cafeteria, his lunch tray held lazily in his hands. I felt a tear race down my cheek, realizing that I would never see my closest friend ever again.

"How are you holding up, soldier?" asked Boss as she entered the Barracks, spotting me.

"I'm fine." I quickly responded as I closed my locker.

"Speak your mind, Van." She responded.

"Is that an order?" I asked her, throwing rank into the conversation. Boss was, true to her name, the leader of Honor Team. She gave the orders and we followed them to the letter. She had proven herself a damn great leader on several occasions through our training, and we'd all follow her to hell and back if ordered too. She was also the oldest member in our Team, 22, with Hercules being the second oldest at the age of 19. Gizmo was the third oldest at 18, leaving Zeke and me as the youngest at the age of 17.

"Come on Vanguard, you haven't talked to anyone since you found out about Tiger. Why won't you let us help you?" she pressed, concern on her face.

I don't know what it was; maybe I was just stubborn, or maybe I just didn't want to admit that I was hurting.

I remained silent.

"Vanâ€|" she started.

I quickly walked past her and exited the Barracks, closing the door behind me.

"You can't keep silent forever, ya know." Spoke Zeke as he stood on the wall beside the door, arms crossed. He too was wearing Liberation armor, and a BR-55 Battle Rifle was leaned against the wall beside him.

"I can try." I replied as I turned to him. It was silent for a few seconds.

"I miss him too, Van; everyone does. You know he wouldn't have wanted you to cast yourself out in depression; he'd want you to move on and become the Spartan he's always wanted to be." Said Zeke.

"It's not that simple." I muttered, my emotions battling with my mind.

"I know it's not." He replied as he stood from the wall and walked towards me, coming face to face. "I miss Sarah every fucking day, but I still move on with my life. It's hard, but I do it; I have to."

"How?" I asked him, beyond curious. Ever since Princess had died, Zeke has never shown any sign of sadness. He seemed to perform better in training, as if determined.

"Because I learned to let go. Take all your sadness, your frustration, your failures, your troubles; and let it all go, Vanguard. That's what makes us Spartans." He replied before walking away, leaving me alone.

* * *

><p>"This is MJOLNIR Mark VI armor. It took us over a year to construct the suits perfectly, using only the data we were able to leak from ONI's Data Files. The suits are fully operational, and each is equipped with special attachments based on their designated Spartan's abilities." Reported Professor Michael Dova as he stood in front of a large rack, where five suits of MJOLNIR armor hung.</p>

We had been ordered by Grayson to report to the Technical Advancements Lab, which was located in the east wing of the facility. The Tech Lab was huge; large computers and machines stood around the room, while different types of armor, vehicles, weapons, and equipment lay on metal tables. Several technicians walked around the room, testing prototypes and whatever the hell they do.

"Only five suits were created, one for each member of Honor Team, largely due to the high cost of making one. Each suit cost us more than the price of making a frigate; if we were to make more than five, it would certainly bankrupt the entire Liberation Front." continued Dova as he pushed his large glasses higher on his nose. He was a scrawny man, with short black hair and a large white lab coat.

"You would have been the only Spartans in the program to wear MJOLNIR armor; the best Spartans would be given the best arsenal." added Grayson as he stood beside the professor. Lucky us! "The UNSC is hours away from arriving, so we need you Spartans suited up and battle ready immediately. Dova, get it done." concluded Grayson as he left the Tech Lab, most likely to give orders to his forces. Grayson was a very busy man these days.

We gave him a salute as he left, before turning back to Dova.

"Shall we begin?" Dova asked. We nodded.

"Honor Leader; would you please step forward?" asked Dova. Boss quickly stepped forward.

Dova pointed to the first suit in line, which Boss took off the line and began to put on. First she stripped down to just a bra and panties, causing us to avert our eyes in respect. She then put on the black Titanium Nanocomposite bodysuit, which seemed to stick to her body and create a sort of "second skin." Next she stepped into a pair of Blue, Titanium boots, lifting her feet as she familiarized herself with the boots. Several technicians grabbed the rest of the armor components and locked them into place on Boss's body. Lastly, she slipped into the blue helmet; a long red stripe reaching from the back of the helmet up to the gold visor.

Boss stood before us, seven feet tall and decked out in a dark blue

suit of MJOLNIR Mark VI armor, a red stripe spanning across her chestplate and left leg. A long combat knife was strapped to her chest, and her left shoulder-plate was painted red. She was daunting; able to strike fear in the most battle hardened of soldiers while wearing her armor.

She looked from left to right and moved her arms and legs, trying to become orientated with the armor.

"Boss's suit is the standard Mark VI armor, and by request from Boss herself, was not enhanced or augmented at all. Nonetheless, this suit will see you safe through countless battles." concluded Dova. Boss didn't want her armor enhanced? I wonder whyâ€!

"Honor-Two, would you please step up next." Spoke Dova.

Hercules stepped forward, a look of eagerness in his eyes. He quickly removed all his clothes save his skivvies, and stood impatiently as the technicians removed a red suit of Mark VI armor. In less than five minutes they had placed the armor on Hercules. I gulped in fear as I gazed at the result.

Hercules stood a staggering eight feet tall, resembling a small tank as he stretched in the massive set of MJOLNIR armor. His suit was double the bulkiness as all the other suits, easily weighing more than a ton.

"Hercules' suit has been modified to match his incredible strength. The armor has been crafted of Titanium-A, and virtually indestructible. The armor has already been field tested, and can successfully shatter a shell from a LAAG upon contact. The suit has also been modified help increase your strength; it should allow you to lift a Pelican, if you were determined." summarized Dova.

Hercules began to laugh, launching his fists through the air like a boxer. Note to self; avoid punches from Hercules if you want to keep your ribcage intact.

"Honor-Three, you're next." said Dova.

I gulped and stepped forward, expecting anything.

I slipped into the Nanocomposite suit, spreading my arms so that the technicians could outfit me with some badass armor. And so they did.

I had been given a suit of white armor, with black stripes painted on the chestplate and arm pieces, resembling a white tiger. I had asked the techies to paint it like that this morning, in as a memento of my fallen comrade.

My helmet was of a different model, strangely resembling a white ODST helmet. A black stripe stretched from the back of the helmet up to the forehead.

I eagerly slid the helmet over my head, gasping as I gazed at the Heads-Up-Display.

The HUD was spectacular; every person in the room was highlighted in

a bright blue light, indicating friendlies; with the other member of my team highlighted in green. In the top of my vision I could see my health status, indicated by a blue bar, representing my suits shields, and small blue squares underneath it; representing my pulse. The closer I was to dying, the more squares would vanish. In the bottom right of my vision was a small transparent box, which displayed the status of my teammates.

"Vanguard's suit has been greatly modified; first of all, since you will be taking the role as the scout in the team, you have been given an ODST style helmet; giving you a greater field of vision. Your suit is also the only one of its kind to possess the MVES, an augmentation that took us seven years to develop and perfect." stated Dova.

"MVES?" I wondered aloud, turning towards the professor. I stood at seven feet tall now, having to look down at the professor.

"The Maximum-Voltage-Enhancement-System. Your suit has trillions of specialized Nanomachines coursing through it, ready to be activated. Once you decide to activate the Nanomachines, they will borrow the electricity used to function your suits shields and temporarily convert it into electrical voltage, which will be transferred through your armor and into your muscles. The result is a temporary boost in strength, speed, and endurance, at the cost of your shields being disabled during the boost. Think of it as a massive adrenaline rush. The boost is measured in multiples of 10, with 100 being the maximum. Also, the boost will sap energy from your muscles after every use, which means that every time you activate the Nanomachines you will be lowering your life expectancy. We believe that achieving a 100% boost is equal to sacrificing ten months of life." explained Dova.

I let all that sink in. A massive adrenaline rush huh?

"Honor-Four, you're next." said Dova.

Zeke stepped up and they fit him into his black MJOLNIR armor.

"Your suit has been modified to meet your demands as the sniper of the team. The helmet has been equipped with several different types of attachments; thermal vision, night-vision, and a laser sight. The arm and shoulder pieces have been upgraded to absorb all weapon kick, so you can fire any sniper rifle without recoil." explained Dova.

"Awesome." exclaimed Zeke as he tested out the different visor features.

"And last but not least; Honor-Five." called Dova.

"Finally!" shouted Gizmo, literally jumping forward. Zeke chuckled.

Gizmo took the final set of MJOLNIR Mark VI armor from the rack and fastened it on himself. When he was finished he stood proud and mighty, decked out in a dark green suit of what looked like standard Mark VI armor.

"I guess you can tell them what your armor is capable of, Gizmo, since you designed and built it yourself." said Dova as he nodded

towards Gizmo.

"This," shouted Gizmo as he raised his right arm, revealing a small Data Pad that was integrated into his arm piece. "Is what makes my armor so superior to all of yours! When activated, this device boosts my shielding systems, forcing my suit into a sort of 'Armor Lock' for a short time. When in that state, I will be completely invincible, able to survive a direct impact from a frigate! The Data Pad also includes a Terra-Fuse class hacking software, which allows me to hack any tech nearby and also send out Electro-Magnetic Pulses from my suit!" exclaimed Gizmo as he explained his all-powerful armor.

"Eh, I like my suit better." Replied Hercules as he walked by, shoving Gizmo into a wall, denting it. We all laughed.

"Give yourselves a few minutes to get comfortable in that armor, then head up to the Conference Room; Grayson wants all the Liberation commanders present to discuss plans for the upcoming battle. Dismissed!" shouted Dova as he gave a crisp salute.

* * *

><p>"Ah, Honor Team; please come in, take a seat." said Grayson as we entered the Conference Room. We had to lower our heads in order to fit through the doorway, and Hercules had to rotate his whole body sideways just to make it into the room. We all decided it was a bad idea to sit; for fear that the chairs would literally shatter under our weight.</p>

Three other men sat around the round table with Grayson, all old war veterans garbed in black suits. Each commanded one of the three Liberation Front cruisers; the Oath of Salvation, the Oath of Forgiveness, and the Oath of Transcendence. Together with the Oath of Repentance the four ships form the Oaths, the flagships and command centers of the Liberation army.

"Most of our forces have reached the planet, and are awaiting further instructions, sir." Spoke one of the commanders, addressing Grayson.

"Thirty two frigates orbit the planet as we speak, with over forty Pelicans patrolling the cities; all awaiting orders as well." said another commander.

"Our ground forces have been scattered to the three cities nearby; Derris, Kharlan, and the capital, Vessius City. If all three of these cities were to be taken by the UNSC, there would be nothing stopping them from marching here, to Ragnarok; and if Ragnarok is lost, then all hope will be lost." said the last commander, his voice grim.

"Ragnarok shall be protected by seven Surface-to-Orbit MAC Cannons, which will help keep UNSC pelicans and frigates from coming within range of the facility. The Oath of Repentance will also be patrolling the area, providing additional support.

Ragnarok is not what we should be worried about, gentleman; it is the three cities surrounding it, that we should be concerned over. Each city acts as a shield, protecting Ragnarok on all sides from attack. Like you said commander, the UNSC cannot successfully march on

Ragnarok without first gaining control of one of the three cities. With that being said, our objective is simple; we must keep the UNSC from taking the cities at all costs." stated Grayson.

"And how do we plan on doing that? We'll be defending entire cities from an entire UNSC fleet!" asked one of the commanders.

"Split our forces into three battalions, with each being sent to a different city. Send any frigates not assigned to orbital defense to assist the forces barricading the cities, including the _Forgiveness_, Salvation, _and_ _Transcendence_. As long as we have enough time to properly fortify the cities' main streets and set up tactical defenses, we should be able to hold out. It's extremely risky, but it's a lot better than having to deal with an entire UNSC fleet knocking on Ragnarok's front door." replied Grayson.

"Yes sir!" responded the three commanders as they stood and saluted. They left the room to carry out their orders, giving us a nod as they went.

"And that's where you come in, Spartans," started Grayson as he turned to us. "We have sufficient forces to put up a hell of a fight for the UNSC, but with our army split into three, we may not be powerful enough to succeed. With Spartans assisting our troops, however, we may stand a chance at holding our own. I'm sending you to assist our troops in Vessius City. Keeping control of the city is one of our highest priorities, so make sure that it is secured at all costs. If the opposition is too great and the city is lost, then you are to retreat back here and await further instructions.

Head to the armory and get some weapons, then report to the front of the facility; two Pelicans will be waiting to take you to your destination. That is all, Honor Leader." stated Grayson as he stood.

"Sir, yes sir." saluted Boss as she turned and left, with the rest of us close behind. This didn't sound like a good plan, and I was glad I wasn't the only one who thought so.

* * *

><p>We had stopped in the armory as ordered and grabbed some weaponry; Boss taking an MA5B and a BR-55, Hercules hefting a M90 Shotgun and a M41 Rocket launcher, Zeke grabbing a 99D-S2 Anti Materiel Sniper Rifle, Gizmo taking two SMGs, and me grabbing a MA5B and a DMR.</p>

After stocking up on grenades we exited the armory, heading towards the front of the facility.

* * *

><p>Two Pelicans were parked outside of the facility, just like Grayson had said.</p>

It was sunset, and the sky was ablaze in a fire of orange light as the sun was beginning to dip below the horizon. There were no clouds in the sky, only the black hulls of ships as they drifted through the air.

Ragnarok had changed in the past days. Large metal barricades were constructed around the building, and turrets were stationed about. The seven large Surface-to-Orbit MAC cannons were alive and operational, their cannons pointed towards the sky. Soldiers patrolled the barricades, awaiting the enemy silently.

Far in the distance, beyond the grass plains to the north, stood Vessius City; its large skyscrapers and buildings jutting into the sky as frigates floated above it. The city spanned across the countryside for miles, making it the largest city on the planet. A series of roads led from the city and into the forest, eventually connecting with Ragnarok after many miles. Dozens of Warthogs raced across the roads, carrying soldiers and weapons to the cities.

To the west of Ragnarok was Derris, which stood a few miles away. The city was rather small, half the size of Vessius City, and only a few skyscrapers stood in its midst.

To the east was Kharlan, a small port city built along the Beorc River. Kharlan was even smaller than Derris, largely due to the fact that it was used as a trade center; shipping resources and materials along the Beorc River and to other locations nearby. The city may be small, but it would be fairly easy to defend due to its small size. Kharlan was also crucial to the Liberations forces, as it was the spine of their army; sending resources and weapons to Ragnarok, Derris, and Vessius City. If Kharlan was lost, we would be severely crippled and cut off from supplies; which is very bad.

Suddenly I heard a series of low popping sounds, as if someone were shooting rockets a few miles away. I quickly looked at the sky, recognizing that sound; it was the sound of multiple ships exiting Slipspace. Dozens of large objects began to block the sun, and I quickly realized they were ships approaching from a distance. A chill began to race up my spine.

The emergency siren began to scream to life, followed shortly by similar sirens from the three surrounding cities. All around us soldiers began to run frantically, reporting to their battle stations and preparing for war.

The UNSC fleet had arrived.

"Let's go!" said Boss as she climbed into the nearest pelican. Gizmo climbed in after her, with Hercules, Zeke, and me jumping into the other pelican.

Our Pelican roared to life and began to lift off the ground, causing us to tilt forward in our seats. Within seconds we were airborne, soaring low over the ground as we sped towards Vessius City.

"UNSC fleet inbound; I count at least fifty frigates in all, with a cruiser commanding the fleet."

"This is Night Hawk-871 moving to engage. All Liberation frigates along the frontlines advance to intercept the enemy. Check your fields of fire; we don't want any ships crashing into the cities below. Sixty seconds until contact."

"This is Fox-Tail Company stationed on the frontlines of Vessius City; we've spotted enemy Pelicans dropping off troops in the field

nearby, and ODST HEV pods were sighted falling from the skies. We estimate at least three minutes until they reach the city!"

The voices stirred through my helmet COMM, overwhelming me. I looked forward and noticed Zeke staring at me, his left hand pointed towards the left of his helmet. Wait no, not his helmet, his COMM. I quickly understood the gesture and switched my COMM channel from 'Liberation Battle-Net,' to 'Honor Squad-COMM.' I flushed in embarrassment, glad that Zeke had corrected me now instead of later.

We weren't even in combat yet and I was already making mistakes.

"Sorry." I said to Zeke, who turned to look out of the back of the pelican. I followed his gaze, watching as Ragnarok appeared smaller as we moved away.

"It's ok; stay focused." was his reply.

"How ya holding up over there, Vanguard?" I heard Boss ask over Squad-COMM, her voice as loud as if she were sitting right next to me.

"Ask me that again when we reach the city." I answered, grinning.

She laughed, "I'll remember to."

A series of distant explosions caught my attention, causing me to lift out of my seat and head for the cockpit, peering out of the large windshield ahead.

"Bloody hellâ€|" muttered the pilot as he gazed in horror at the scene.

Massive explosions dotted the distant sky as frigates were blown apart, their hulls ablaze and dropping to the ground below. The two forces had clashed, each side launching MAC rounds and missiles at the other, filling the sky with fire and debris. The UNSC fleet pressed forward, their ships arranged in a 'V' formation; a phalanx. The air was filled with the ear-splitting sound of cannons firing and ships exploding; my ears saved from the harsh noise by my helmet.

I watched in silence as a Liberation frigate rammed into a UNSC freighter, splitting the freighter's hull in two and sending a swarm of explosions rippling through both ships. Nearby, a UNSC frigate launched a volley of missiles into an enemy frigate ahead of it, the missiles impacting with the nose of the ship and destroying the bridge, killing all inside. The battle continued, with both sides giving it all they had. No matter how hard we tried, the Liberation was unable to break the UNSCs phalanx; which was vital if we were to own the sky again.

"Look over there!" I heard the pilot shout, pointing to the lone UNSC cruiser that was at the back of the fleet, as if overseeing the battle. The cruiser was at least three times the size of the frigates, and the words Soul of Ice were painted onto its hull.

"Why aren't they trying to take down the cruiser?" asked the

pilot.

"We can't break through their formation to reach it." I answered, grim. Our forces seemed scattered and unorganized; as if Grayson had taken no time at all to organize our air tactics. The UNSC forces were beyond organized AND in an extremely effective formation, successfully preventing our ships from breaking through their defenses. If we couldn't form a phalanx of our own or break theirs soon, we would be crushed.

We were less than a mile away from Vessius City now, and already the city was a battlefield. Pelicans flew above and around the city, competing in fierce dogfights with their enemies. Smoke began to rise above the cities, originating from unknown fires below. Gunfire and the sound of dull explosions filled the air constantly, growing louder as we drew closer to the city.

"Ready up!" shouted Hercules as he hefted his shotgun, causing Zeke to retrieve his sniper rifle and me to grab my MA5B in response.

"Holy shit!" yelled the pilot as an enemy Longsword screamed past us, missing our pelican by mere feet. I quickly turned, looking out the back of the pelican as I watched the Longsword bank left and bolt towards the city of Kharlan. The Longsword swept over the city, dropping a large object over the city. I watched in horror as the object fell, vanishing from my sight as it dropped beneath the roofs of the buildings. Then, all hell broke loose.

A magnificent flash of blinding white light filled the entire area, forcing me to yell as I shielded my eyes and my visor maximized its polarization. The loudest explosion I have ever heard before in my life followed a few seconds after the flash, and a massive gust of wind tilted the pelican and caused us to struggle to stay afoot. I regained my balance and stood at the edge of the pelican, staring into the enormous wall of fire that rose from the ground. After a few moments the wall of fire morphed into the shape of a giant mushroom, causing a fog of smoke to drift into the sky and cover the entire area in darkness. We all remained deathly silent, speechless as we tried to grasp what we had just saw.

"It's been confirmed! The city of Kharlan has just been nuked! I repeat; Kharlan has been nuked! The entire city is gone!" I heard Boss shout through my COMM, pure despair in her voice.

"God help us all." mumbled the pilot, his eyes wide with fear.

I continued to stare at the mushroom cloud, unable to look away.

Hundreds of soldiers and civilians lost in an instant.

Suddenly there was a loud boom as our pelican pitched forward, causing me to lose my balance and drop to one knee. The pilot began to curse as he tried to keep us in the air, smoke clouding the windshield. The Pelicans siren began to sound, its repetitiveness growing annoying rather quickly.

"The left wings been blown clean off! I can't keep her steady! We're falling!" shouted the pilot, his voice shaky with dread.

Shit!

"Boss, we've got a problem over here!" I shouted into the COMM.

"You're not the only one!" muttered Boss. I could hear Gizmo cursing in the background.

I turned my head to the right and spotted Boss's pelican, grimacing. Their pelican was losing altitude, and the front of it was covered in a cone of fire and smoke. It looked as if the entire cockpit had been blown apart.

Our pelican continued to drop, the bottom of the ship barely missing the roof of a building as fell above the city.

"Orders, sir?" I asked, beginning to grow nervous. We were about to crash headfirst, who wouldn't be a little nervous?

"Remember your training!" Boss replied. I lost sight of their pelican as it careened to the left, dipping below the jungle of buildings.

"Hold on!" I heard Zeke shout as we headed for an empty street below, falling at nearly 60mph. I closed my eyes and grabbed hold of a metal handle on the ceiling of the pelican, bracing myself for the impact.

The pelican smashed into the pavement head on, causing the cockpit to flatten as the pilot's bones were shattered and crushed, killing him instantly. I was thrown forward upon impact, smacking into Hercules as he was launched into the small wall between the hangar and the cockpit.

The pelican continued to slide along the road at an alarming speed, crashing into the base of a building and sending debris slamming onto the roof. The pelican finally came to a halt, sparks flying everywhere. All was silent.

With a groan I crawled to the edge of the hangar and fell onto the pavement road below, lying on my belly as my body ached. My armor had been able to protect me for the most part, but I could still feel bruises on my arms and legs and the taste of blood in the back of my throat.

A large, red, armored foot landed on the ground beside my head. I looked up and saw Hercules standing above, his armor scratched in several places. He quickly held out his hand, which I grabbed onto immediately. He lifted me to my feet and gave me a nod, handing me my MA5B that I had dropped during the crash.

"Thanks." I grunted as I took the weapon.

"That sure was interesting. I'm fine, by the way." I heard Zeke mutter as he stepped out of the pelican, his black armor also scratched. His sniper rifle was cradled in his hands, not a scratch or dent on it.

We had landed in an abandoned section of the city; vehicles and warthogs were scattered along the street, and the sound of gunfire

could be heard in the distance. The area was deserted, with the three of us being the only people around.

I flinched as my visor beeped and a blue arrow pointed north, showing me our waypoint.

"Looks like Boss updated our Nav markers; they must've survived their crash as well." I said, turning to the others.

"Orders?" Zeke asked Hercules. According to rank, he was the second-in-command of our Team, hence the codename Honor-Two. He was the one in charge for now until we regrouped with Boss and Gizmo.

"Follow the blue arrow." Shrugged Hercules as he ran to a nearby warthog.

The warthog was completely flipped over, but was in pretty good condition. With a single flick of his right hand Hercules grabbed the hood and flipped the warthog with ease, the tires slamming down on the road as the vehicle shook.

"I'll take the LAAG; Van, you're driving." ordered Hercules as he jumped behind the chain gun. Zeke and I quickly jumped into the warthog after him.

I grinned widely as I took the wheel, turning the ignition and bringing the vehicle to life. It had been years since I last drove any type of vehicle; the last time being during our escape in "Operation jailbreak." It was completely obvious that Grayson didn't trust me behind any vehicle. Needless to say, I was beyond eager to drive again.

I slammed my foot on the gas as the warthog jolted forward. I twisted the wheel to the right, causing the warthog to turn in response. We burst through the street, the wind scraping against the warthog. I turned the wheel left and right, trying my best to avoid the parked vehicles in the streets. I quickly turned the wheel hard left, causing the warthog to drift as I barely avoided slamming into a tanker.

"Oi! Watch it, will ya!" I heard Hercules shout as he struggled to stay on the LAAG, his hands holding on to the triggers for dear life. I turned to Zeke and gave him a thumbs up, causing him to chuckle.

It took us a full ten minutes to drive through a mile of the city, mostly from me having to take detours multiple times. Through it all we headed north, towards the Nav marker that pointed towards the Liberation frontlines and the battle that raged there.

We drove into a large intersection, and I immediately knew something was wrong. I had realized too late.

We sped into the middle of the intersection, and I had little less than a second to scout our surroundings.

To our left, down the road leading west was a barricade of overturned vehicles, with at least thirty Liberation soldiers taking cover behind it. Large craters had dented the road around the

barricade.

To our right, down a road that leaded east was a squad of twenty UNSC ODSTS, their weapons ablaze as they traded fire with the Liberation troops across the intersection. In the midst of the squad sat a large Scorpion Tank, its cannon pointed straight at our warthog.

Before I could even react the cannon flashed as a thundering roar echoed through the intersection. A massive jolt shoved the warthog sideways, causing it to flip several times as we were hit by the shell. I was launched from the driver's seat as the warthog caught fire and exploded, sending Zeke and Hercules spinning to the ground. I flipped a few times and skidded on the pavement, my arms and legs flailing. I felt my back hit something hard and my body came to a stop, leaving me dazed and bruised. I stood with a groan, looking around in confusion.

The warthog, or what was left of it, lay ablaze in the middle of the intersection, blocking the tank ahead of me from view. To my left I saw Zeke and Hercules stand, shaking their heads as they tried to come out of their daze.

Behind us was the barricade that the LF troops stood behind, staring in shock as they watched us stand. I guess they didn't expect three Spartans to stand after being hit by a turret shell and launched out of an exploding warthog.

"Shit!" I cursed as I crouched, avoiding the sudden hail of bullets that was sent my way. I spotted my MA5B a few yards away, realizing that it and the DMR had both gone flying during the explosion. I sprinted towards the rifle, sliding as I picked it up and clicked off the safety.

I immediately took aim at an ODST running towards me, obviously trying to get in range since he wielded a M90 Shotgun. I pulled the trigger, feeling no recoil whatsoever as fire blew from the tip of the rifle. The ODST was hit instantly, his armor unable to protect him from the piercing rounds. He lost his footing and dropped to the ground, ten holes in his chest. Another ODST tried to flank me, his SMG raised and his hand pressing down the trigger. I swung my arms in his direction, letting out a burst of fire and knocking the soldiers head back as three bullets broke through his visor and dug themselves into his brain.

An ODST to my right had gotten dangerously close, taking out a combat knife and swinging for my chest. I swatted his arm to the side with the barrel of the MA5B, immediately smashing my right fist into his visor. The helmet cracked and caved in instantly, causing my fist to continue through and crush the front of his skull.

Two ODSTS charged me after another of their comrades fell, but were quickly cut down by fire from the Liberation troops behind me.

"Van, look out!" Zeke yelled over the COMM.

I looked up at the enemy tank, suddenly realizing that the cannon was facing directly at me. SHIT!

I rolled to my right as the tank fired, sending a shell hurtling into the road where I had stood seconds ago. The shell exploded on impact,

creating a large crater and sending fire, smoke, and debris everywhere. I was tossed a few yards away, hitting the ground yet again as I shook my head, groaning. Motherfucker!

I lifted my head in time to see Hercules sprinting towards the Scorpion tank, reaching it in seconds. He gripped the front of the tank with both hands, grunting as he lifted it upward. With a shout he threw the entire tank into a building to his right, ending the lives of three ODSTs as they were crushed by the heavy tank. Small explosions rippled across the tank, marking the end of its use.

"Stand by!" I heard a Liberation lieutenant shout behind me, causing his men to cease fire. The intersection was silent now, every single ODST lying dead on the road.

Hercules walked over to where I stood, his armored hands smoking. "You ok? I thought you were a goner for a second there."

"It'll take more than that to kill me." I replied.

I grabbed my DMR, which I had spotted lying under some rubble a few yards away.

Zeke scavenged the corpses of the ODSTs for anything useful, finding enough 7.62 rounds to go around.

Hercules went and spoke with the lieutenant, asking him where the frontlines were located.

"A few miles down the highway; you can't miss it. Sounds like there's some serious fighting going on there though." The lieutenant replied quickly. "We were stationed here to protect the frontlines from an enemy flanking force; seems the general was right for sending us here. The UNSC have tried to flank the frontlines five times now, with us able to repel them enough to discourage further attempts. We're short on troops and ammo though."

"I'll notify the general of your situation when we reach the frontlines." Hercules replied.

The lieutenant gave a crisp salute, "Thank you, sir!"

* * *

><p>The lieutenant was grateful enough to give us another warthog, telling us to be careful when we were on the highway; we were a shooting gallery as long as we were on it.</p>

I hopped into the driver's seat again as the other two Spartans climbed onto the warthog. I stepped on the gas and we lurched forward, following the intersection north until we reached the highway.

The road began to slant upwards as we drove onto the highway. When we were at least fifty feet above the ground the road began to straighten, allowing us to see everything around us.

The buildings ahead were an absolute mess; fire clung to the sides of most of the buildings as smoke covered the sky, pelicans and

Longswords flying overhead. Holes and cracks were scattered on almost all the buildings and skyscrapers; scars that marred the city of its previous beauty. The sound of heavy gunfire got louder as we neared the frontlines, causing chills to race up my spine constantly.

"Is thatâ€|the _Oath of Forgiveness_?" I heard Zeke shout as he looked upward.

The giant cruiser that was the Oath of Forgiveness cast its massive shadow over us as it fell towards the city, fire engulfing it and massive holes in its body.

I watched in horror as the nose of the cruiser struck a skyscraper a mile to our right, causing the top half of the building to collapse and fall to the ground in a waterfall of debris. The body of the cruiser collided with the ground shortly after, causing a gigantic sound of thunder to cascade throughout the entire city. A wave of smoke and ash filled the air around the ships wreckage.

"Do you believe in karma?" asked Zeke rhetorically as we continued down the highway.

* * *

><p>"Zeke; there's a sniper on the hills to the left! Vanguard, take out that rocket jockey on your 3!" shouted Boss as she barked orders at us. I quickly turned to my right, spotting the rocket wielding UNSC soldier as he struggled to put another rocket tube in the launcher. I took aim and fired a round from the DMR, knocking his head back as the bullet passed through his eyes. Beside me, Zeke fired with his Anti-Materiel Rifle, the .50 caliber bullet blowing a hole the size of a bowling ball into a ODSTs chest. I reloaded my DMR and took aim again, adding my gunfire to the hundred other soldiers behind the frontline barricades beside me.</p>

We had reached the barricades an hour ago, quickly regrouping with Boss and Gizmo, who had already been hunkered down behind the metal barricades and trading fire with the enemy. One hundred other Liberation soldiers were stationed beside them, filling the air with gunfire as they tried to resist the UNSC soldiers trying to break through.

These soldiers were our last line of defense; the other two frontline trenches a few yards ahead being lost in the beginning minutes of the battle. If we were to lose this last line, Vessius City would be lost to the UNSC.

Hundreds of UNSC soldiers and ODST troops were scattered across the grassy plains ahead, most taking cover in the trenches of our lost defensive lines. Pelicans made constant strafes, bombing our position and keeping our heads down.

This was the type of battle that I had been trained for.

I ducked with a curse as I narrowly avoided being beheaded by a .50 round, shot by a lone sniper that was lying down on the hill a kilometer away.

"Zeke! Sniper!" I shouted as I marked the sniper's position on my visor and sent the data to Zeke. A few seconds later he turned and

pulled the trigger, hitting the sniper in the head as the bullet traveled all the way into his stomach.

I felt a hard pat on my back and turned to see Sergeant Thorn crouched beside me, his brown face covered in dirt and blood.

"Derris has been lost; that means there will no reinforcements coming to our aid! We're all that's left and we can't hold out much longer!" he shouted. I cursed.

"Can our birds in the sky give us any support?" I shouted back.

"The battle for the sky is heavily one-sided; we're getting massacred! All air support has been called back to Ragnarok; it's best to assume that we won't be flying anytime soon!" replied Thorn.

I nodded and turned back to the battlefield, killing a soldier as he popped out of cover above the trench. Thorn continued down the line, sending his report to Boss and the other lieutenants.

An enemy pelican lowered over the ground, letting loose with its chaingun and killing ten soldiers on our line with a single sweep. I ducked, hearing the bullets past above the barricade.

I looked to my right and spotted Hercules stand, his M41 rocket launcher resting on his shoulder. He fired, watching as the rocket zipped through the air and exploded upon contact with the pelican's cockpit. The pelican buckled under the blow and swirled out of control, detonating in a haze of fire a few yards away.

"Hell yea!" shouted the soldiers on the line, their spirits being lifted at the sight of the large, red Spartan.

We continued to fight on the line for two hours, as more and more UNSC troops were dropped into the fields ahead. We were starting to get outnumbered 3 to 1, and each soldier I killed was replaced by three more.

"Grenades!" shouted Thorn as he lobbed a grenade. Suddenly, the air was filled with hundreds of grenades as the other soldiers obeyed the order. The grenades hit the trenches and detonated, causing a chain reaction that sent several limp bodies flying into the air, burning. A wall of flames rose over the trench, causing the UNSC troops to shout in surprise.

"Reload!" shouted Thorn again, and again the soldiers complied. I reloaded my DMR; down to my last clip. I looked up at Thorn, about to tell him that we were almost out of ammo, but paused midsentence as I noticed that his head was no longer attached to his neck. Spurts of blood shot out of his neck as his body fell backwards, his head blown off by a stray sniper shot. I averted my eyes back to the battlefield.

I spotted three soldiers charge through the wall of flame, raising their rifles as they began to fire. I swept across the soldier's heads, nailing all three in quick succession.

I looked in dread as more than three hundred soldiers charged at once

out of the flame wall, rifles ablaze.

The sky darkened as three UNSC frigates loomed over the battlefield, dropping bombs and missiles on our barricades. I shielded my eyes as the line was broken in several places, bodies of screaming soldiers being catapulted into the air.

"Retreat!" Boss shouted, waving her hand back and forth.

"Fallback to Ragnarok!"

"Retreat!"

"Head back! The city is lost!" came the shouts of the other lieutenants as they confirmed the order.

I immediately broke rank and headed towards Boss, who was sprinting back into the city along with the other members of Honor Team.

A pelican dropped out of the sky and hovered close to the ground, its hangar door open as a soldier waved at us.

"Let's go, Honor Team!" he shouted as we jumped into the pelican.

The pelican rose back into the air, quickly taking flight and heading back towards Ragnarok. Behind us, more frigates drifted above the city as UNSC soldiers sprinted into the city, killing any Liberation troops too slow to escape in time.

"DAMNIT!" shouted Zeke as he punched the wall, denting it. We remained silent, all feeling his intense frustration.

We had lost the city. We had failed.

* * *

><p>It was well into the night when the UNSC army reached the gates of Ragnarok.</p>

It had taken the Liberation an hour to recall its entire troop back to Ragnarok, and then another hour to place fortifications and trenches around the facility.

So there we were, crouching behind yet another wall of barricades, waiting nervously for the UNSC to arrive and slaughter us all.

I was tired and hurting; bruises scattered across my entire body. Hercules sat beside me, his breath coming in quick gasps as he struggled to calm his body. I didn't blame him at all; he had exerted so much energy in the past few hours that I was surprised that he could still stand. Boss, Gizmo, and Zeke were to my right, each one as calm as ever.

A total of two hundred and thirty nine soldiers were hunkered down around us, the last remnants of the Liberations forces. We had been royally slaughtered, with our death tolls in the hundreds.

"Quiet yourselves! Here they come!" I heard someone shout nearby, probably a lieutenant.

As if to confirm his statement, the trees began to rustle as hundreds of UNSC soldiers marched out of the forest, their weapons raised; surprisingly, no one had opened fire yet. Several warthogs and Scorpion tanks followed the soldiers, and frigates floated above. Above all the frigates, high in the sky, drifted the Soul of Ice, as if overlooking the entire scene.

We held our fire as the army approached, no one daring to move and regret it.

An old man dressed in a gray suit and matching hat marched up to the gates of the facility, followed by sixteen ODST troops. I gulped as I gazed at the shining medals and bars on his chest.

"We have come to negotiate with your commanding officer." Spoke the man, his voice commanding.

After a few moments, the facility gates opened, allowing the man and his guards to enter the building. Before he stepped into the facility, however, he turned to us. "Come with me, Spartans."

* * *

><p>"It's been a while since we've last met face to face, hasn't it Cromwell?" said Grayson as we entered his office. Admiral Cromwell and his guards stood in the center of the room, while Boss, Zeke, Hercules, Gizmo, and I stood to the side. Grayson sat at his desk, pouring himself a glass of scotch as two of his guards stood behind him.</p>

"Likewise, Grayson." replied Cromwell, his voice intimidating. I immediately felt a spark of tension between the two commanders, hinting at a rather unpleasant past between the two.

"And what brings an Admiral of the United Nations Space Command to my doorsteps?" Grayson asked, taking a sip of the scotch. Had Grayson already accepted defeat?

"They do." Cromwell answered, pointing to us. "They may have been raised and trained by you and your personnel, but those Spartans are still property of the UNSC; and we aim to collect immediately."

"If you think that I would just let you walk away with my Spartans, then you are more foolish than I thought." laughed Grayson hysterically. This seemed to anger Cromwell.

"If you think that you and your ragtag organization of rebels can stop us, then YOU are more foolish than I thought." He growled back. "It's taken us more than twenty years to find you again, Grayson, and the headquarters to your empire. This day marks the end of your Liberation Front of insurrectionists, and the end of your life."

Grayson laughed again, taking a long gulp from his glass. Suddenly, the thunder of hundreds of weapons firing outside could be heard, surprising Grayson. After a few minutes the gunfire stopped, and the night fell silent again.

"You're out of soldiers, and now you're out of time." Stated Cromwell

as he withdrew a M6D magnum from its holster on his side.

Before Grayson's guards could even act, they were cut down by the ODSTs, their blood spilling against the wall as they fell to the ground.

We, the Spartans of Honor Team, remained still and silent, unwilling to help Grayson. We had no allegiance to the man anymore.

"Kill him!" Grayson shouted to us, his voice shaky. Whether his voice wavered out of fear or anger, I did not know.

We remained still.

"They are Spartans, Grayson; they are only loyal to the good of humanity, as they always have been. You may have tried to change what side they fought for, but you could never change their duty as Spartans. You were doomed to lose from the beginning." Explained Cromwell as he raised the magnum.

"Fuck you Cromwell!" he turned to us, madness in his eyes, "FUCK YOU TOO YOU DEMONS! MAY YOU ROT IN HELL FOR ETERNITY BEFORE-"

Cromwell pulled the trigger, sending a bullet deep in Grayson's brain and cutting off his rant. Grayson, leader of the now fallen Liberation Front and the man who had raised us as Spartans, fell, his body resting on the floor.

Seconds went by and nobody moved, Cromwell waiting to see our response.

Boss stepped forward and gave a crisp salute, "Orders, sir?"

H:V

* * *

><p>John-117

July 1, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Aboard the remains of the **_Forward unto Dawn_. Spira, Paradigm System.**

"Chief! Chief, come on! Wake up John!" shouted a desperate, female voice nearby. The shouts were so distant, as if someone were shouting from a mile away.

My body began to heat again as the cryo-tube I had been locked in began to power down. My limbs began to gain their feeling and my blood and nerves began to flow again. I could feel my heart beat start, steadily growing faster as I was brought back to full awareness.

I moved my head left and right, becoming aware that I was still wearing my MJOLNIR Mark VI armor.

The cryo-tube door slid open with a loud hiss, causing the cold air to escape into the room beyond. I pushed myself out of the pod, Zero-Gravity causing me to float to the circular control pad where a small blue AI stood, watching me.

"I'm here." I reassured her, looking around at the darkened interior of the room. I was still aboard the Forward unto Dawn.

"Sorry to wake you so soon, but we have a problem." replied Cortana, her small eyes wide with fear. I noticed the emotion in her voice. Was she rampant? How long had I been asleep?

I drifted through the ship, all the way up until I came to the section where the frigate had been split in two. I gazed out and into the sea of space, staring in awe at the massive planet that loomed ahead.

The planet was dark, and I could see no clouds or any other sign of atmosphere around it. A large, circular hole was on the surface of the planet, acting as a massive black hole as it sucked everything around inside of it. I looked around, immediately aware that the Dawn was being drawn into the portal as well.

"There's no way to escape the planet's pull, I don't think we'll make it out of this one, chief. I think our luck has finally run out." Cortana spoke, her voice grim.

I didn't believe her; I was born lucky.

"We'll make it."

* * *

><p>- End of Section One

7. II: Arrival

Halo: Vanguard

Section Two: Guardian

"Spira will be your greatest victory, and your greatest sacrifice; for once you set foot on these rocks, you shall never see home again."

* * *

><p>Ten years ago Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 destroyed the Ark and ended the Human-Covenant War. Following humanity's greatest victory, the remnants of the defeated Covenant Army were scattered across the Galaxy, powerless to stop humanity from reclaiming the galaxy. The Sangheili race returned to their home world, promising to fight alongside the humans again if the need ever arised. Humanity began to rebuild their lost worlds, and peace finally overtook the universe.**

**_The year is 2563. Covenant activity has slowly begun to increase across the galaxy, and UNSC leaders begin to fear a resurrection of the Covenant Empire. The remaining Forerunner Installations, known as Halos, have been destroyed or deactivated by the UNSC, who fear they may be involved in the Covenant's uprising. Only one known Forerunner artifact remains, Gamma Halo, which floats above the Colony of Spira. The UNSC fears that Spira is the Covenant's next target, and is

trying everything it can to prevent a full-scale invasion and the start of a second Human-Covenant War_. **

* * *

><p>Chapter One: Arrival

Vanguard

July 1, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Spira, Paradigm System.

Spira was beautiful; long fields of grass stretched across the landscape for miles in all directions, small hills rising from the ground. Large, ominous mountains stood tall in the distance, their summits clouded by a white fog. The cloudless sky hung over the land, its light blue color creating a sense of tranquility and peace. A cool breeze swept across the plains, causing the grass to sway in waves. A crimson sun peered down on the planet, warming its surface and blanketing it with light.

A large, gray ring sat above the horizon, its metallic mass overlooking the planet. The ring world was enormous, with patches of land stretching across it. It was a Halo, an ancient construct created thousands of years ago by a race of gods. The Halo drifted around the planet of Spira, its presence both graceful and haunting.

The M12 Warthog came to a stop, its tires screeching as they slid across the dirt road, sending small rocks flying through the air.

I grabbed my MA5B from the seat beside me and jumped out of the Warthog, hitting the dirt road below with a thud and causing the Warthog to rock slightly from the sudden loss of weight. I shouldered my weapon and began to walk towards the UNSC outpost ahead, hearing the tires of the Warthog screech as it continued down the road.

The Outpost was huge, easily spanning two kilometers. Shacks and small metal warehouses were scattered around, with vehicles and crates of ammo and weapons cluttering the ground. Pelicans would occasionally circle above the rooftops, dropping supplies and soldiers into the outpost.

I entered the outpost, passing a small metal sign that read: **UNSC Defense Operations Base**. I struggled to keep from bumping into soldiers as they hurried by, carrying out orders given to them by their commanders. Warthogs and tanks rolled through the commotion, their tires and treads kicking up fogs of dust.

I continued to walk deeper into the base, quickly becoming aware that the soldiers around me had stopped what they were doing to stare in awe at me. A young marine dropped a crate full of ammo, which spilled onto the ground, his eyes wide with shock as he gazed at the large white armored Spartan that walked past him.

"Is thatâ€|a Spartan?"

"Bloody Hell; another Spartan!"

"I can't believe my eyesâ€|"

I ignored the whispers, gasps, and comments around me and rounded a corner, coming face-to-face with a UNSC Lieutenant.

"Honor-Three Spartan Vanguard; I'm Lieutenant Blackwood, commander of UNSC Nova Company, third division." The lieutenant saluted, as I did the same.

Blackwood was your typical soldier; strong, confident, brave. He had black eyes and a face of stone; not even a sliver of emotion escaped from his demeanor. He wore standard UNSC battle armor, and a MA5B Rifle was strapped to his back. The Status ID in my suit brought up a transparent, blue box above his head, displaying his service number and rank.

"Admiral Hawke and the rest of your Team are waiting for you in the Command Center. Please, follow me." finished Blackwood.

I nodded, and proceeded to follow his pace as he turned and headed down the gravel road. I turned my head to the left and noticed a stack of large crates, a chill running through my spine as my suit identified Tactical Nuclear Warheads within them.

"So why did Command send me here? I thought Spira was just a research colony; how come Command called for three fleets to head here immediately?" I asked, beyond curious.

After my mission in New Mombasa, I had been given a mere three days to rest up and prepare to leave Earth again. High Command had immediately ordered for a large portion of the UNSC army to head to Spira, a small planet abundant in ancient Forerunner technology and UNSC research facilities created to study them. I don't think anyone knew exactly why we were being sent here, but we knew what we were being sent here to do.

"I'm sorry but I don't have all the answers, Spartan. All I was told was that the Brass was expecting Covenant activity around the planet, maybe even a full-scale attack on Spira; probably because of that thing." Replied Blackwood as he lifted his head and gazed at the ring world in the far distance.

I grew silent, remembering the stories and rumors I've heard regarding the giant Halos. Apparently, if it wasn't for Spartan-117, those things would have brought about the end of time.

"So you're a Spartan." said Blackwood as he slowed his pace and gazed back at me, as if acknowledging me for the first time. "Damn, you really are a sight for sore eyes. The last time I've ever seen a Spartan was eleven years ago, on the Ark. I was able to shake hands with Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 himself after my battalion helped him take down a covenant Scarab Unit."

Ever since Spartan-117 shattered the covenant army and ended the threat of the Halos, the remaining Covenant forces had fled into hiding. The UNSC has been determined to destroy the Covenant Empire completely, and have authorized hundreds of ODST Kill Squads to investigate leads on pockets of Covenant resistance and slaughter all they found. Master Chief was able to single-handedly cripple the entire Covenant Empire." Concluded Blackwood as he continued his pace.

A few years ago my Team was sent to Reach to help UNSC forces sweep the barren planet of Covenant stragglers. The threat was nowhere near what we had feared it to be; the covenant was small in number and unorganized, a result of being leaderless.

But this was different; UNSC High Command feared that the covenant was gathering their remaining stragglers, and forming the first organized covenant fleet since the war had ended eleven years ago. If that theory was correct, then the covenant fleet presented a massive threat to humanity and could spark the creation of other covenant straggler fleets; which could bring about a second Human-Covenant War.

"Here we are." stated Blackwood as he stopped.

A small, metal building stood ahead of us, surrounded by tents packed with UNSC troops. Antennas jutted out of the building's roof, and the walls had been constructed of several different types of metal; a sure sign that it had been built in a hurry. The UNSC flag was nailed above the door, and a sign reading '**UNSC DFB Command Center**' was posted on the door itself.

"Come on." called Blackwood as he headed for the Command Center. He nodded to a guard stationed nearby before opening the metal door, motioning for me to go ahead inside.

"Thanks for your help, soldier." I said as I nodded to Blackwood.

"It was an honor to meet you, sir." He saluted.

I walked inside the Command Center.

Five people stood around a rectangular table, four of them wearing MJOLNIR Mark VI armor and the last wearing the uniform of a UNSC Admiral. The Spartans turned to me, their expressions of happiness lost behind their gold visors.

"You're late, Van." Spoke Boss as I reached the table, her blue armor shifting as she turned to me.

"My apologies, sir." was all I could manage to say.

"How was your mission in New Mombasa?" she asked.

I grew silent, the memories of the past year rushing back to me.

"I'm glad that you could finally join us, Vanguard." remarked Admiral Hawke as he stood beside him.

Hawke was a renowned UNSC Fleet Admiral, his gray tuxedo decorated with his countless awards. His matching gray hat sat atop his head, his black hair slipping through the bottom. His face was hardened and determined, due to his thirty years on the battlefield. He was the perfect Commander, both in appearance, personality, and reputation.

I gave him a nod in response, and he turned back to the tactical map

of Spira on the table below him.

"As I was saying; the bulk of our forces have been stationed inside several key cities around North Spira, while the rest are hunkered down in outposts scattered across the region. Make no mistake Spartans; a full-scale covenant attack is imminent.

Intel has tracked a large contingent of covenant ships patrolling the system, but has managed to stay beyond our reach. Spira's Orbital Defense Grid is more than capable of keeping the fleet at bay; but not for much longer." reported Hawke.

"Only the north region? Why not the south?" I wondered aloud.

"The northern region of Spira is the only habitable part of the planet. The planet of Spira is a Forerunner construct; built millennia ago by the ancient race themselves. The bulk of the planet is entirely metallic, while some sort of Alien Artificial Gravity Core keeps the planet stable.

The southern region of the planet is uninhabitable; an area created of alien constructs, artifacts, and spires. Years ago when we discovered the planet and the Halo above it. We had created research settlements and facilities across the northern region, in order to study and examine the planet and its origins. Through research we've discovered that Spira is a Shield World, a bomb shelter built to protect the people inside from the Halo Arrays.

Two years ago research came to a screeching halt and the planet was transformed into a military headquarters, with the strength to match the glory of Reach." Concluded Hawke.

We let that sink in.

"Why was research abandoned?" asked Gizmo.

"We had discovered that Gamma Halo was unreachable; some sort of Forerunner energy field surrounds the Halo and prevents anything from entering the ring. The only other lead for future research is 'The Void,' but the Black Hole prevented us from getting close." replied Hawke.

"What's the Void?" I asked, curious.

"It's a giant Black Hole built into the center of the southern region of Spira; a portal that we believe leads into the core of the planet. Unfortunately, every non-Forerunner created object within a thousand mile radius of the portal is sucked into the portal, and lost forever. We found that out the hard way when one of our frigates patrolling the planet was sucked into the Void and never seen or heard from again." finished Hawke.

"No offense, Admiral, but I didn't come here to learn an astronomy lesson; what's our mission?" remarked Zeke, clearly impatient. If looks could kill, the black armored Spartan would have been vaporized by Hawke AND Boss instantly. I grinned behind my helmet; same old Zeke.

"Our Orbital Defense Grid is offline, meaning we are completely vulnerable to a Covenant invasion. If the Covenant were to attack

now, our ships in orbit would be greatly outmatched.

The Communications Facility that controls the Defense Grid has gone dark, and you're being sent in to reactivate the Grid. You are to leave within the hour."

"What happened to the facility?" asked Boss, puzzled.

"We don't know. Contact was lost a few hours ago, and the UNSC troops stationed nearby have failed to report in. the blackout is probably the result of an Insurrectionist attack on the facility, in which case you are to kill all insurgents you find." concluded Hawke.

"Understood." nodded Boss.

"A pelican will arrive shortly to take you to the facility; until then, head to the armory and prepare to ship out. Dismissed Spartans." concluded Hawke as he saluted, before leaving the room. The metal door closed behind him.

"Damnit, Zeke! What have I told you about disrespecting your superiors?" shouted

Boss as she turned to Zeke, who was no doubt grinning under his helmet.

"You haven't changed a bit." I remarked as I turned to him too, causing him to laugh in response. It was hard to believe that I hadn't seen him in over a yearâ€|

"AHH!" I yelled in pain as a large, red gauntlet patted my helmet.

"Heh, you haven't grown an inch Van."

I looked up to see Hercules towering over me, his left hand resting on my head.

"Good to see you too, you giant gorilla!" I replied with a grin.

Hercules laughed and walked over to Zeke, sparking an argument with the sniper about who had the most kills during their mission on New Harvest.

"You miss me?" I said smugly as I turned to Boss.

"I believe the correct way to address your commanding officer is with a salute, Honor-Three." she replied, her voice emotionless.

I grinned and saluted immediately, "Sir, yes sir."

"We're heading out, Honor." announced Boss as she walked past me, giving me a slight pat on the shoulder. I followed Honor-Leader as she left the building, with Honor-Two, Four, and Five close behind me. I grinned as I gazed at the four other Spartans, comforted by their presence. After a whole year of loneliness, I had finally regrouped with my family.

* * *

><p>"So then Hercules throws me like a javelin into the air, and into the open hatch of the Covenant Phantom. As I pass through the Phantom, the Jackals, Grunts, and Elites inside all stare at me, their jaws dropped as they watch a Spartan fly through their ship. I primed my grenades and dropped two at their feet, hearing them detonate and destroy the Phantom from the inside as I pass through the ship and into the open air again. After a few seconds of free falling and enjoying the fireworks, I land on my back inside the Warthog's passenger seat again, Hercules and Zeke both laughing as they continue to drive down the street!" concluded Gizmo, laughing.</p>

I grinned, listening as he filled the Pelican with laughter. "Sounds like you've all been busy over the months."

"Yeah." replied Zeke as he reassembled his sniper rifle, having to spend the last hour taking it apart and cleaning it to a shine. "Command's been sending us from mission to bloody mission. I can't remember the last time I had a good night's sleep."

"I'm not complaining." remarked Hercules from the seat beside me. "It's about time Command put us to good use."

"Hell yeah." Zeke mumbled.

We sat in silence as the Pelican continued to fly, its engines humming softly.

"So how was New Mombasa? Did you find your target?" Boss asked as she turned to me.

"Yeahâ€|" I replied, remembering the events of my previous mission.

Silence.

"Did you kill him?" she asked, her voice grim.

A minute went by before I answered her. "No."

"Bloody hell, Vanguard; the guy is a black market super power! He's been supplying insurgents with weapons and ammo for over thirty years! The whole point of the mission was for you to eliminate him and stop his influence in the rebel war!" responded Zeke in protest.

"I couldn't do it." I managed to reply.

"Why the fuck not?" Zeke demanded.

"Zeke, shut the fu-" started Boss before I cut her off midsentence.

"It was my father. The targetâ€|was my father." I confessed.

More silence. No one dared speak.

"ETA two minutes!" shouted the pilot as the Pelican began to lose

altitude.

I glanced out of the back of the cargo bay, spotting the COMM facility in the distance.

The Pelican dropped to the ground, the long blades of grass below swaying from the gusts of wind. I shifted violently as we hit the ground with a thud.

Boss unbuckled from her seat and rose, shouldering her rifle. "Let's go, Honor."

She leapt out of the pelican, causing the others to follow. I quickly unbuckled and left the pelican, my boots slamming into the waves of grass as I followed my team.

"I'm on point." spoke Boss as she raised her rifle. We all nodded in response, and followed as she headed towards the building that stood ahead.

Our pace was fast as we scanned the entire area, searching for any signs of danger. Everything was quiet, save for the wind and our boots as they cut through the grass.

"Stay sharp." Boss reminded us. It had been over a year since we had last operated as a team, and I'm sure we were a little rusty.

"Hostile inbound!" reported Gizmo as he glanced at his radar, a small red dot appearing on the edge of it. We immediately dropped to a crouch and raised our weapons, looking for any signs of movement ahead. We sat there for a full minute, motionless.

"All clear." called Gizmo as the red dot on the radar suddenly vanished, as if whatever it was had vanished from existence. We all stood, breathing out a breath we had all held in.

"Gizmo I want you monitoring the radar constantly; we don't want to run into any surprises. Zeke; cover the rear. Van you're on point with me, and Hercules will command the center. Keep it tight, Spartans!" ordered Boss.

We all nodded, moving into position.

Boss pressed on, reaching the metal door leading into the COMM Facility. The door had been blown apart, debris scattered across the ground as air rushed into the dark interior of the facility.

Boss slowly moved into the building, careful not to step on debris and give away our position.

"Holy shitâ€|" I mumbled as I entered the building, staring at the contents of the room.

Blood drenched the walls and created large puddles on the floor. The bodies of UNSC soldiers, engineers, and personnel lay everywhere; their corpses mangled, burned, and eviscerated. The computers and machines in the room were broken and disabled, sparks popping loudly every now and then. A dim light illuminated the carnage, creating an immediate sense of discomfort.

"Now we know why no one was able to report back to Commandâ€œ!" spoke Zeke as he gazed at the massacre.

"These aren't bullet wounds; they're stab wounds." observed Boss as she kneeled next to a decapitated woman.

"Multiple burns appear all over their bodies, also. This doesn't make any sense; what kind of insurgents are we dealing with here?" I asked, puzzled.

"Don't get distracted." ordered Boss as she waded through the bodies, heading towards an ajar door leading to the second level.

I took one last look at an engineer lying at my feet, his arms blown off and his face burned beyond recognition.

I turned and followed my team up the stairs, the ominous silence of the facility starting to unnerve me.

Boss held up her fist and we all dropped to a crouch immediately, "I've got movement up ahead."

We remained silent, listening.

"Vanguard, take point." ordered Boss as she turned to me. I nodded and moved to the front of the group, my rifle aimed at the door leading into the second level control room. Boss stacked up behind me, intertwining her legs with mine and gripping her M6D pistol.

I glanced back at her and she gave me a nod.

I immediately bashed open the door with my shoulder, dropping to a crouch as I searched the room for targets; sensing Boss's pistol sway above my head as she did the same.

We found no hostiles. The control room was empty.

I stood and shouldered my rifle, "all clear." I took a breath, taking a few seconds to scan the room.

The control room was rather small, with a large stainless window crafted into the right wall, revealing the grass fields and forest outside. Large machines cluttered the room, and a giant computer sat on the far wall; its monitor cracked in several places and its mainframe charred as steam rose into the air.

Gizmo quickly reached the mainframe and set to work, trying to reactivate the Defense Grid.

"Honor-Five; how's it look?" asked Boss as she watched the green armored Spartan work.

"It's a goddamn mess, sir. The CPU is fried and the components are all shorted out. I don't know if I can repair this; the mainframes been burned to shit!" Gizmo replied, yelping as a stray spark zapped his finger. Boss stood in silence, as if contemplating what our next move would be.

"The insurgents must have attacked with explosives; that would

explain the burned and mangled corpses and the fried tech." she concluded.

"And they fled like cowards when they saw us coming. Innies bastards." I remarked in disgust. If there's anything I hate more than an Innies, it's an Innies coward.

"This is Honor-Leader to Command; facility personnel are all KIA and there's no sign of the enemy. The techs fried as well; we suspect collateral damage from explosive charges. We can't reactivate the Grid. We're heading back and awaiting further orders.
Standby."

Reported Boss as we stood around her, silent.

A shadow fell over the room, causing me to glance out of the large window to my right to determine the cause of it.

A Covenant Phantom had appeared a few yards away from the window, its nose facing us as its plasma cannon warmed. I flinched at the sight of the ship, completely frozen in shock.

And that's when all hell broke loose.

"HIT THE DECK!" I shouted at the top of my lungs as I grabbed Boss and threw her to the ground, hearing an ear-splitting blast as the Phantom opened fire.

There was a flash of light as the room seemed to implode, the air heating as fire erupted everywhere. I dropped to the ground, my shields flaring as they were pounded by the intense heat and fire. The entire room shook violently, and a strong blast of air sent us hurtling into the opposite wall. Glass and metal literally cluttered the air, slamming into my suit and denting the walls and floor.

Then, silence.

I groaned, both from the intense aching in my bones and the dizzying feeling in my head. I opened my eyes, black dots popping up randomly in my vision.

I lifted my head, spotting my team on both sides of me, their backs against the wall behind us as they recovered from the explosion.

The wall ahead of us had been completely blown away, replaced by a cloud of smoke, fire, and debris. The entire ceiling of the room had been destroyed, causing the sun's rays to drop onto my visor. The Covenant Phantom floated above us, its engines humming softly. A chill raced up my spine.

Four Elite Majors jumped from the sides of the Phantom and dropped into the control room, shaking the entire room as they landed. The Sangheili spotted us instantly, growling loudly as they gripped their energy swords.

The red armored Elites roared and charged at us, saliva dropping from their jaws. I began to panic, watching as the four lizards the size of fucking tanks stampeded towards us; determined to separate our arms, legs, and heads from our bodies.

"CONTACT!" I shouted as I opened fire with my MA5B, the rounds slamming into the shield of the Elite nearest me. Its shields flared a bright yellow, preventing any of my bullets from reaching the covenant warrior.

The Elite reached me in seconds, thrusting downwards with its sword and hoping to impale me in the chest. I quickly rolled to the left, hearing the energy sword impact with the floor and create a small crater.

Somehow Hercules had reached me, smashing his fist into the Elite's face and causing it to back away. He immediately tackled the behemoth, both of them toppling to the ground.

I quickly rose to my feet, spotting Boss a few meters away as she fought with another Elite; energy sword against combat knife.

I raised my rifle and fired a burst at the Elite, blinking as its shields flared. The elite staggered backwards and turned its heads towards me; a fatal mistake.

Boss swung horizontally towards the Elite's neck, her knife cutting clean through the Sangheili's throat and removing its head. The Elite's head fell to the floor, blood spurting from the base as its glassy eyes remained open. The body dropped in a heap, creating a large puddle of blood on the floor.

She gave me a nod in thanks, before turning to help the others. I turned back to where I had last seen Hercules, spotting him kneeling over the Elite he had been wrestling with moments ago. With a shout Hercules grabbed the Elite's neck, closing his hand and literally crushing the Sangheili's throat.

"Van, help!" I heard Boss shout from behind me, causing me to turn around instantly.

Boss and Gizmo were busy spraying another Elite with gunfire as it charged them, its energy sword held high over its head. Boss rolled to the side as the Elite brought down its sword, slicing clean through the wall that had been behind her.

I quickly opened fire on the Elite, my bullets cutting through its back and head. The Elite groaned in pain before slumping to the ground, lifeless. I caught my breath, realizing that Boss and Gizmo's gunfire had managed to break the Elite's shields before I finished it off.

I quickly raised my rifle again, scanning the room for the last Elite. I spotted it across the room, a massive hole in its head as its brain matter lay in a puddle around its body. Zeke stood above it, his sniper rifle still steaming.

"Covie asshole." He commented.

"Get down!" shouted Boss as the Phantom opened fire again, plasma shots smacking into the walls and floor. I crouched, narrowly avoiding a plasma charge to the face.

"We need to get out of here, sir!" I shouted at Boss, above the hiss

of plasma.

"There's a UNSC Outpost about a klick to the west, beyond the forest. Run fast and keep your head down. Honor, on me!" shouted Boss in reply as she headed for the staircase, with the rest of us close behind.

We ran down the stairs, shouting and cursing as plasma melted away the walls around us and caused debris to fall on top of our heads.

"Move! Move! Move!" I ordered as we ran through the main floor, hearing the thuds of explosions as the second level was blown to bits.

We left the COMM Facility and headed west, towards the large forest ahead. The Phantom was in hot pursuit, showering the ground around us with plasma.

We entered the forest, our feet pounding over the fallen leaves as we continued to push on. I glanced behind us, spotting several Phantoms hovering over the grass fields as they dropped hundreds of covenant troops into the area. Grunts and jackals began to enter the forest and give chase, as the elites ordering them followed close behind.

The forest was immediately filled with plasma fire, causing us to duck, jump, and roll to avoid being hit. We didn't return fire; it was useless. Better to save the ammo.

The ground began to explode in clouds of fire, debris, and plasma as Phantoms bombarded the forest from above.

I looked up to count how many Phantoms were floating above us, immediately regretting it.

Several Phantoms flew over the treetops, firing down on our position wildly. Above the Phantoms was a humongous mass of dark, purple metal; replacing the sky and casting the forest into darkness. A loud humming resonated from the mass above, causing the forest itself to vibrate softly.

A Covenant Cruiser was floating directly above us.

"HOW THE FUCK DID THEY GET THAT THING THROUGH ORBIT?" I heard Zeke shout through my COMM.

"A better question is how the hell did the goddamn covenant get to the planet undetected!" Hercules replied.

"Shut up and keep moving!" commanded Boss.

I gritted my teeth and continued to sprint, following my team as we ran deeper and deeper into the forest, gunfire all around us.

I heard a loud thud and felt an intense heat rise from the ground below me, and the next thing I knew I was ten feet in the air. A wave of debris, leaves, smoke, and fire engulfed me as I fell back to the ground, my back slamming into the trunk of a tree. My vision blurred as my mind went blank, causing me to drift into

unconsciousness.

8. II: Nova

Chapter Two: Nova

July 1, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Spira, Paradigm System.

Open your eyes, Jack.

My brain sparked to life again, causing my eyes to open instantly. An intense wave of pain rushed over me, and I coughed violently as blood shot from my mouth and splashed against my visor.

I struggled to breathe, my lungs stinging with every gasp of air. My entire body ached, and my bones felt like they had been set on fire.

I looked at my surroundings, gazing at the dark forest around me. Shadows and figures were moving through the trees, their weapons ablaze as they sent bolts of plasma flying through the air.

I lowered my head, being overcome by the sudden rush of dizziness and pain.

"Oh no you don't; you're not dying on us yet!" I heard a familiar voice shout, his voice rising above the constant ringing in my ears.

I felt a large hand grip the chestplate of my armor, and start dragging me backwards. I groaned in pain as Hercules dragged me, the pain increasing every second.

I turned my head to the right, spotting Boss and Gizmo as they traded fire with the covenant troops behind us.

"Hang on, Van." I heard Zeke say through my helmet COMM, concern in his voice.

Hercules grunted as he picked up his pace, causing small trails of debris to fly into the air as my legs dragged through the leaves.

I gritted my teeth, pissed off at my current predicament. I spotted a covenant Elite sprinting towards us, his Plasma Rifle peppering the ground around us with plasma fire.

Cursing, I quickly withdrew my M6D and took aim at the Elite, emptying an entire clip into the Alien's shields as they flared and failed. I reloaded, quickly firing another shot through its eyes, blood flying through the air.

I moved my hand to the left, spotting a trio of grunts running out of a bush, one of them preparing to throw a plasma grenade. I felt the pistol kick as I fired at the grunt, hearing the alien yelp as the bullet tore through its chest and knocked it backwards. The plasma grenade fell to the ground, detonating on impact and incinerating the other two grunts.

"Help me up!" I shouted to Hercules as I grabbed his arm. The giant Spartan lifted my chest and I clambered to my feet, giving Hercules a nod in thanks.

"You sure you're okay?" I heard Boss ask, the barrel of her rifle red with heat.

"Yeah, let's go!" I answered before breaking off into a sprint. The others followed close behind, their boots stomping on the ground as they pushed on.

We continued sprinting through the forest for twenty minutes, gunfire and explosions constantly filling the air with debris. We managed to keep up a fast pace, unwilling to stop and be blown to oblivion.

"Keep moving Honor! The Outpost is less than a mile away!" shouted Boss beside me, her legs a blur as she continued to run.

I looked ahead, spotting the line where the forest came to an end and a grass field took its place. The silhouette of a cluster of buildings sat on the horizon, growing clearer as we got closer.

We broke through the forest and into the vast plains of grass beyond, the Outpost standing a kilometer ahead. The soldiers stationed there had given no signs of alert, obviously oblivious to the coming Covenant Battalion.

We reached the Outpost in minutes, passing a metal sign that read '**UNSC Defensive Operations Outpost: Echo**.'

The Outpost was very similar to the one we had been in a few hours ago, except for the trenches that had been dug into the ground around the base. Metal barricades were placed along the buildings, and .50 caliber chainguns were mounted every few yards.

"Zeke; get on top of that building and provide sniper fire. Vanguard, Hercules; you're going to be with me on the frontlines. Gizmo; head for the Command Center and alert the Commanding Officer." ordered Boss as she stopped to catch her breath. "We're in for one hell of a fight.

* * *

><p>It had taken ten minutes for Nova Company Third Division Echo to rally its troops and mount a formidable defensive position. Fifty soldiers, including Hercules, Boss, and I, stood in the trenches surrounding the front of the outpost, while seventy five troops covered our rears and sat behind the barricades. Two soldiers manned the chainguns on the second line, while Zeke sat on the roof of the Command Center, overlooking the entire area.</p>

"Watch your fields of fire! Watch out for snipers and remember to keep your heads down! This is not a drill, marines; if you are hit, you WILL die!" barked Lieutenant Deseron as he patrolled the trench lines, warning the soldiers of Nova Company and preparing them for the coming battle.

Deseron was an excellent Lieutenant. He was fairly built, with short, dirty blonde hair and bright blue eyes. His combat armor was worn and

scarred, a testament to his years of service. A white skull with three long, red scars on its forehead was tattooed on his left shoulder; the insignia of Nova Company.

Deseron crouched in front of Boss and me, his BR55 gripped in his hands, "we've got some trouble, Spartans. We were unable to contact Command; meaning we can't request evac, air support, or reinforcements until the Battle-Net is back online. We're on our own out here."

"Here they come!" I heard a soldier shout from my right as we watched the forest ahead.

I quickly turned my attention to the forest, spotting a large group of covenant troops as they ran towards the outpost. I raised my MA5B and slapped a fresh mag into its frame, calming my breathing.

"Alright, Nova; let's show the Spartans what we can do!" shouted Deseron as he jumped down into the trench next to me, bloodlust in his eyes.

"HOOAH!" over a hundred and twenty soldiers shouted in unison.

We opened fire, mowing down at least thirty grunts and jackals as they tried to reach the trenches. Once again my ears were filled with the constant roar of gunfire, and oddly I felt at peace.

I fired on a trio of jackal snipers trying to take cover behind a boulder, taking one of them down and cursing when the others ducked behind cover. They immediately laid down cover fire, forcing me to duck down into the trench in order to keep my head.

"Zeke; Two jackal snipers behind a boulder on your ten!" I shouted through my COMM as another sniper shot flew over the trench, passing clean through a soldier on the second line.

I heard the crack of a sniper rifle behind me as one of the jackals slumped against the rock, blood oozing from its chest.

The last jackal began to panic and retreated, yelping loudly and fleeing back into the forest.

"Van, take out those grunts!" I heard Boss warn as she pointed to the right. I turned, spotting ten grunts setting up a plasma turret, an Elite barking orders to them. I pulled the trigger and fired off a few bursts, taking down four of the grunts with headshots.

A soldier to my right noticed the grunts as well and combined his fire with mine, effectively slaughtering the rest of the grunts.

The Elite roared and picked up the plasma turret, pulling the trigger and hammering our position with heavy fire.

"Shit!" I cursed as I ducked, pinned down by the Elite.

"Grenade!" I heard the soldier beside me shout as he threw the object. I risked a glance at the Elite, watching as the grenade exploded at its feet. The Elite was launched into the air, its limbs flying in all direction.

I turned to the soldier beside me, giving him a nod. He nodded in return, before popping out of cover and firing on a group of jackal skirmishers.

I felt a pat on my shoulder and turned to see Boss and Hercules crouched behind me.

"We're moving down the line. Come on." said Boss.

I nodded before following the two Spartans through the trench line.

We passed through the dirt trench, spent ammo cases crunching under our boots. The soldiers on the line continued to fire at the Covenant, completely oblivious to us as we passed by.

A plasma grenade detonated a few yards ahead of us, tossing the limp bodies of soldiers through the air and creating a smoking crater in the side of the trench. I covered my head as a mist of blood and guts rained down on us.

We reached the far left edge of the trench, just in time to spot a group of grunts run across the field towards the outpost.

"Covenant flanking party! Stop them!" shouted Boss as she opened fire, tearing the head off of a grunt. Hercules and I obeyed, the Covenant troops being cut down by the hail of 7.62 rounds. In seconds the flanking party was massacred, their bodies leaking blood into the grass.

"They're retreating!" yelled a soldier nearby, watching as the Covenant fled back into the forest. Their Elite commanders slowly walked back into the trees, glaring back at the outpost with ferocious eyes.

I spotted a red armored Elite turn back and stare at me, its demonic eyes seeming to stare straight into mine. The Elite gave a loud roar, before stepping into the forest and out of sight.

* * *

><p>"We got extremely lucky. The Covenant attack was amateurish and unorganized; probably because they weren't expecting us to mount an effective defense." reported Deseron, his armor covered in alien blood.</p>

The battle had lasted a mere ten minutes, before the Covenant had gotten smart and retreated to the forest to regroup and come up with an actual battle strategy. We had only lost three soldiers, while over forty Covenant soldiers lay dead in streams of blood across the grass plains. Deseron was right; we had been lucky.

"They'll regroup and mount a proper offensive next time. Wraiths, Ghosts, Shades, Turrets; the whole shi-bang. That last attack was only the beginning." warned Boss as she leaned against the table. The rest of us remained silent.

Deseron had immediately called for a meeting in the Command Center after the battle, to discuss casualties, damage, and our next move.

Hercules and Gizmo had decided to help themselves to dinner in the cafeteria, while Boss, Zeke, and I decided to meet with Deseron.

"Were you able to contact Command?" I asked Deseron.

"Afraid not." He answered, frowning. "The BattleNet is still down and we can't reach High Command or the other divisions of Nova Company. The Covenant must have hit the COMMs Relay."

"We need to be evacuated as soon as possible; we're up against an entire Covenant Battalion with roughly two hundred marines!" I replied.

"Echo Base isn't the best place to mount an effective line of defense; too many positions to cover and not enough men or ammo to go around." added Zeke.

"We'll need to do the best we can with what we have and hold out until we can contact Command. Lieutenant; gather weapons and ammo and tell your men to hunker down in the trenches and barricade lines. Assign sentries to watch the forest 24/7, and alert the Company of any Covenant activity.

Honor-Four will lead a sniper squad positioned on the roofs, providing cover fire and reconnaissance." ordered Boss.

"Aye aye." replied Zeke as he stood, grabbing his sniper rifle.

"Honor-Two will be in charge of the barricade line, and Honor-Five will help repair communications in the Command Center." continued Boss.

She turned to me, "Vanguard; you'll be with me on the frontlines. If the Covenant manages to break through the line, we'll retreat back to the barricades."

"Yes sir." I nodded.

"Sounds like a plan. I'll join you on the frontlines." agreed Deseron.

Boss grabbed her MA5B and shouldered the rifle, "alright people, you know your orders; now get it done!"

* * *

><p>I sat on a mound of dirt, watching two soldiers carry a large crate of ammo through the trench line.</p>

It had been two hours since the Covenant last retreated into the forest after their first failed attempt to siege Echo Outpost. The massive Cruise overlooking the land had flown away towards the east, escorted by several Covenant frigates and Seraphs. The good news for us was that the Covenant Fleet was on the move; leaving us with only the Covenant Battalion in the forest to worry about. The bad news for the UNSC army stationed all over Spira was that the Covenant Fleet was on the moveâ€|in a few hours the Fleet would clash with the UNSC army and spark a second Human-Covenant War and the Battle for

Spira.

Deseron walked up to me, sitting down on the dirt mound with a sigh. He reached behind his back and retrieved a large Bowie Knife, using it to pick at an oozing scab on his forearm.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked him, admiring the weapon.

He glanced up at me, "it was a gift from my father. He had scavenged it off the corpse of an Innies during the Rebel War. It's saved my life countless times."

I grew quiet, watching as the soldiers carrying the ammo crate spilled bullets all over the ground.

"So what's your story? How'd you get chosen to become a Spartan?" asked Deseron. I was expecting someone to ask me that question, sooner or later.

"I didn't have a choice. Becoming a Spartan was the only way to survive." I answered, my voice grim.

"You guys are fucking war heroes! When we saw the cruiser over the forest, we were about to lose hope until you Spartans arrived." exclaimed Deseron.

"We're not heroes; we were scared too." I replied.

We both grew silent.

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant!" came a shout from behind us. A few seconds later a soldier ran up to us, out of breath and sweating.

The soldier was tall and skinny, with ice blue eyes and short blonde hair that stuck out of his helmet. He was green as grass, the last attack probably being the first time he had experienced combat.

"What is it, Clancy?" Deseron asked, putting away his knife.

"The black armored Spartan says that he's spotted movement in the forest!" Clancy reported between gasps of breath.

"We need more time." spoke Boss as she walked towards us, her rifle in her hands. Clancy gasped in complete shock at the sight of her.

"CONTACT!" I heard someone shout along the trench line. I immediately stood and turned towards the forest, raising my rifle as I spotted a lone grunt running through the plains. A distant sniper shot rang through my ears as the grunt's head exploded, its body falling to join the other corpses on the ground.

* * *

><p>It was an hour later when the Covenant finally launched their second attack.</p>

We had stood at the ready for sixty minutes; slowly awaiting the battle that we knew would come at any second. Soldiers around me

began to shake and mumble, trying their hardest to drown the fear inside them.

I glanced to my left, seeing Clancy standing beside me. His entire body was shaking, causing his rifle to shake in response. He was scared shitless; his heart racing.

"Relax." I said to him calmly. He turned to me, his eyes gazing at my visor.

"Y-yes sir!" he nodded, before turning back towards the forest.

We were standing in the very middle of the trench line, with Boss positioned on the far left and Deseron barking orders on the far right. Hercules was waiting behind the barricades with the other soldiers that made up the second line, no doubt gripping his MA5B firmly. Zeke was lying on his stomach on a building inside the Outpost, his Sniper Rifle set on a tripod in front of him and a squad of snipers around him.

We were ready.

"Here they come!"

Covenant Grunts rushed out of the forest en masse, plasma pistol flaring as they shot wildly. Their numbers totaled around fifty, as they ran towards the outpost.

Over a hundred soldiers in the trench line opened fire, their rifles creating a roar of thunder across the plains. The grunts were slaughtered by the barrage, their blood raining over the grass. Bodies fell to the ground every second, as more and more grunts ran out of the forest.

I reloaded and continued to push down the trigger of my MA5B, knocking a grunt backwards a few feet as the bullets slammed into its chest.

I heard the crack of Zeke's sniper rifle as he fired, his .50 caliber bullet passing through the chest of a grunt, slicing through the head of the grunt behind it, and then finally digging itself into the brain of the grunt BEHIND that grunt. Three kills with one bullet!

We fired at the never ending horde of grunts for five minutes, their bodies beginning to stack up on the plains.

A group of grunts ran out of the forest, carrying Portable Shield Generators, used to create Stationary Energy Shields. Packs of grunts carrying Portable Cover began to run out of the forest, mixing with the normal grunts troops.

"Take out those shield grunts!" I heard Boss shout through my COMM.

I took her advice, firing a burst at two grunts as they hefted the Energy Shield between them. The grunts fell in a shower of blood, the shield fizzing out.

I spread the word down the line, ordering the soldiers around me to

target the shield grunts.

When the shield grunts reached half a kilometer away from our trenches, they dropped the shields onto the ground, protecting them from our bullets. Soon more and more grunts were able to deploy their shield next to the others, creating a rag-tag line of shields.

"What are they up to?" I heard Hercules ask over the COMM.

"I don't knowâ€|" I replied, watching as my bullets deflected harmlessly off one of the energy shields.

I switched targets, cutting down a trio of grunts that were getting dangerously close to reaching the safety of the energy shields.

A handful of soldiers threw grenades at the shield line, the explosives detonating and managing to destroy several of the energy shields.

"Look!" Clancy shouted, pointing at the forest. I looked and saw a pack of thirty Jackals sprint towards the safety of the shields. The Jackals kept their heads down as they ran, careful not to get hit by any stray shots.

We immediately turned our fire towards the Jackals, only managing to drop three of them.

The Jackals reached the shield line, pushing the grunts out of the way as they began to dig. The grunts were immediately sliced to ribbons by 7.62 rounds, no longer protected by the shields.

"Stop them! Stop the Jackals before they can finish digging those trenches!" Deseron shouted to us as he walked down the front lines, occasionally raising his rifle and killing a grunt or two.

His request was impossible; there was no way we could reach the Jackals without using an air strike to destroy the shield line. Rushing the line was an option, but we would only get slaughtered by the Covenant troops hiding behind it.

The Jackals finished digging their trenches thirty minutes into the battle, dropping into them when they finished.

Now two trenches were constructed in front Echo Base, one ours and one theirs. The trenches sat parallel to each other, half a kilometer apart, with the covenant trench being twice as long as ours.

"Elites!" someone shouted, and I immediately glanced at the forest to confirm the report.

Fifty Elite Minors and Majors began to walk out of the forest and towards the trench lines, a Jackal equipped with an energy shield protecting each Sangheili. The Elites stared at us, their eyes seeming to burn pure fear into our hearts. I gulped at the sight of the demons, a chill racing up my spine.

"CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! Don't waste your ammo!" shouted Deseron as he watched the Elites walk, knowing that our bullets would be useless against their shields. The constant ring of gunfire ceased, with only

the hiss of plasma shots filling the air.

We watched in defeat as the Elites dropped into the trenches, barking orders as the rest of the Covenant troops nearby did the same.

"SON OF A BITCH!" I shouted as I threw down my rifle, walking back towards the Command Center as more and more Covenant troops began to fill their trench line.

Welcome to Trench Warfare, Vanguard. Welcome to Hell.

* * *

><p>We remained on the alert for hours, fearing for our lives as we stared at the Covenant battalion gazing back at us from the safety of their trench. Every now and then someone would open fire, causing a shoot-out between both lines and the death of a few of our soldiers.</p>

The Covenant Energy Shields guarding their trenches had failed and deactivated hours ago, but it made no difference; they were still protected by their line.

The sun had fallen over the horizon a while ago, clouding the battlefield in darkness. The light of the moon lit the plains, casting the entire area in a dim glow.

I removed my helmet and set it on the ground beside me, my hair drenched in sweat and sticking to my forehead. I swallowed in a massive gulp of air, savoring the fresh air for the first time in years. I couldn't remember the last time I had taken off my helmet.

"Here. Eat up." called Zeke as he passed a helmet towards me, soup sloshing around inside it. I took the make-shift bowl and thanked him, before wrecking havoc on the soup.

Zeke lifted his head towards the sky, his visor reflecting the moons light as he stared at the ominous Halo above.

Zeke was actually the only member of Honor Team whose face I hadn't seen since we first got our armor ten years ago. Never once had I seen him without his helmet on, causing me to regretfully forget what his face actually looked like. He was almost like a ghost now; his armor being his enigma.

"Kinda reminds me of when we were on the frontlines of Vessius City, all those years ago." He commented.

"Yeah." I murmured between mouthfuls of soup.

"I feel at home here; on the battlefield. The constant threat of dying isâ€œ exhilarating." he spoke, his gaze still upon the ring.

"Me too." I agreed.

"Spartans." greeted Deseron as he sat beside me, holding his own helmet-bowl of soup. He stared at me for a full minute, awe struck as he gazed at my face.

"Sorry." He apologized as he turned his head, realizing what he had been doing, "I didn't know that Spartans looked so normal!"

"We're human too," I replied coldly.

Deseron grew silent, aware that Zeke's visor was turned towards him.

"Anything to report?" I asked the lieutenant.

"Uh, no. The Covenant line has been pretty quiet; save for the packs of troops that have joined the line in the past hours. We'll have sentries watching all through the night, while the rest of us get some sleep. If the Covenant makes a move, we'll know immediately." replied Deseron.

"That's as good a plan as any." I mumbled, finishing my soup.

"They're toying with us," remarked Zeke. "They could easily charge our lines and take the outpost; they have the man power. There's only one reason why they're being cautious, and you know what that reason is, Van."

I thought about it.

"Us." I answered, referring to Honor Team.

"They're afraid of us. They're not stupid; they've heard stories about the Spartan 'Demons' and what they can do on the battlefield." replied Zeke.

"Then we need to use that fear to our advantage." I remarked.

"Exactly."

* * *

><p>I couldn't sleep at all that night; the thought of the enemy waiting so close to us overwhelmed my exhaustion. Most of the other soldiers, including Zeke, Boss, and Hercules had managed to drift to sleep, with only a couple of sentries and me awake and alert.</p>

It was well into the night, and the plains were dead silent. There was no movement coming from the Covenant trench line, a sign that they were resting as well.

I grabbed my MA5B Assault Rifle and began to disassemble it, taking out a rag and cleaning the parts. It was more of a hobby for me instead of tedious work; it relaxed me.

"You still awake, sir?" I heard Clancy ask as he walked up to me, careful not to wake Deseron who lay asleep a few feet away.

"Yeah." I answered as I continued to clean the frame of my rifle.

"I couldn't sleep either; my bodies still in shock from that last

battle." He admitted, scratching his hair. He sat beside me, taking out a small book and a pencil. I watched him as he began to draw, etching a drawing of a Spartan on the paper.

"I've always wanted to be a Spartan," he said as he saw me staring at the drawing. "It was my dream as a kid. You guys are like role models to me."

"That's a really good drawing." I told him.

"Thanks. My mum always said I had a talent for art, but I never believed her. I guess I was just modest; I don't know." He replied.

"How old are you?" I asked him; a question that had bothered me since I had first seen him. He seemed young for a marine.

"Uhâ€|18, sir." He replied quickly.

"Bullshit. What's your real age, soldier?" I pressed on.

He grew silent for a few seconds, before deciding it was best not to lie to a Spartan.

"16." He finally answered.

"That would explain your rookie behavior." I concluded, grinning.

He remained silent.

"You have a lot more life ahead of you, kid; learn what you can from your superiors and you'll grow up to be a fine soldier." I said to him, meaning every word.

"T-thanks, sir." He replied, a smile on his face as he finished his picture. I stared at the Spartan drawn on the page, a rifle held in his hands. It was pretty damn good.

I glanced up at Clancy, noticing a blinding spear of light appear above his head. The flash of light temporarily blinded me, catching me off guard and causing me to shield my eyes with my hands.

The spear of light swung down, passing clean through Clancy's left shoulder and cutting straight through to his right pelvis. Clancy's eyes opened wide with shock, his pupils glassy as he dropped in two on the ground, lifeless.

"NO!" I shouted as I saw the severed body of the boy, blood soaking my boots. He was just a kidâ€|

The active camouflage deactivated and a large Elite Major garbed in black armor appeared in front of me, the spear of light making up the energy sword in his hand.

The Assassin roared and charged me, grabbing my neck with his hand and slamming me to the ground. I tightened my neck, trying my hardest to keep from being strangled by the beast.

The Elite brought down its sword hand towards my head, and I quickly grabbed its wrist with my left hand. The sword halted a few inches

away from my visor, causing me to feel the intense heat emanating from the weapon.

The Assassin opened its jaws and roared, showering my visor with saliva. Suddenly the tip of a knife appeared in the center of the Elite's mouth, killing it instantly and causing the alien to slump onto my body.

I pushed the corpse off my body and stood, staring at Deseron as he withdrew his Bowie Knife from the Elite's head.

"Thanks." I said to him, still catching my breath. He nodded, before running down the line to check and see if any other assassins had managed to infiltrate our lines.

I looked down at the body of Clancy, then at the Elite assassin.

The Elite's goal had been to assassinate me; thus giving the covenant one less 'Demon' to worry about. Clancy had been killed because he stood in the way of the Elite's mission.

He had died needlessly.

* * *

><p>July 2, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Echo Base.
Spira, Paradigm System.

Day 2 of the "Battle for Echo Base"

The morning sun had risen over the horizon, ushering in a new day. No one had slept again after hearing the confrontation I had with the Elite assassin, scared that another would appear and slit their throats.

Soldiers had passed around raw eggs and milk for breakfast; you know, your typical five-star meal. I decided I'd pass on the eggs.

Deseron had Clancy's body buried an hour after his death, as a sign of honor towards his fallen comrade.

Covenant Seraphs had been swooping down and bombarding our line with plasma mortars all morning, causing us to keep our heads down. We had already lost ten marines in the bombing runs.

"How ya holdin up?" asked Boss as she stood beside me, putting her hand on my shoulder.

"I'm fine." I answered, truthfully. I don't know why, but Clancy's death hadn't affected me mentally as much as I thought it wouldâ€|.as much as it SHOULD have, I mean.

"HERE THEY COME!" a soldier to my far right shouted, before opening fire with his BR55.

With shouts and roars, Grunts, Jackals, and Elites began to hop out of their trench line and charge ours, the remaining troop behind them providing cover fire.

We were forced to hit the deck, in order to avoid losing our heads in

the barrage of plasma shots. I heard a scream as a soldier was hit in the face by a plasma charge, his face melted by the sludge. He dropped without a sound.

The barricade line behind us opened fire, causing the covenant to stop their charge and hit the dirt.

I popped out of cover, sweeping my rifle from left to right and killing four Grunts and an Elite that we crouched a few feet in front of me. Elites jumped down into our trench line, forcing marines to fight to the death against the Sangheili.

I caught a Jackal by the throat as he jumped down into the trench beside me, twitching my hand to the left as I snapped its neck.

I turned to the left, spotting Boss empty an entire clip into the belly of an Elite Major. She was fine.

A plasma charge hit my shields, causing them to flare up and an alarm to ring in my helmet. I immediately dropped to a crouch, cursing inwardly. How could I be so clumsy!

"Secure the line! Get back into formation! Goddamn someone kill this prick!" I heard Deseron shout somewhere nearby.

"Vanguard, look out!" Zeke shouted through COMM.

I turned to see a Phantom hovering in front of me, its cannon warming and aimed at me. Shit!

It fired, sending a plasma blast racing towards me. I rolled to the left, feeling the ground shake as the blast impacted with the trench and created a large smoking crater.

I recovered from my roll and fired at the ship, my rounds deflecting harmlessly off its armor.

"Hercules I need your help! Get your ass down here NOW!" I shouted, cursing as I dodged another plasma shot.

Hercules was beside me in seconds, crouching as he watched the Phantom hover above us. Goddamn he got here fast!

"You know what to do." I told him, pointing up towards the Phantom.

He nodded, and I imagined him grinning behind his helmet.

The red armored Spartan quickly grabbed me with his right hand. With a mighty roar he threw me into the air, towards the Phantom.

I straightened my body as I lifted into the air, trying to become as aero-dynamic as possible.

I flew into the cargo bay of the Phantom, crashing into the wall with a thud. I quickly rose to my feet, raising my rifle at the seven Jackals and Grunts that stared in shock at me.

I opened fire, sweeping my rifle through the room and painting the floor with alien blood. By the time the last bullet left my rifle the

room was clear, seven bodies littering the floor. I wasn't done yet, though.

I primed a grenade and walked to the far wall, smashing my fist through the metal wall and into the cockpit beyond. I dropped the grenade, removing my hand from the wall and backing up.

I heard a deafening explosion as the grenade detonated, destroying the cockpit and causing the Phantom to spin rapidly. I struggled to stand, realizing that I had a serious problem. Shit; didn't think that one through!

The Phantom swerved through the air, smoke trailing in all directions as the ship carried me behind the covenant line and above the forest.

I cursed as the ship began to lose altitude, following a collision course with a tree below. I jumped out of the side of the ship, landing in a series of rolls as the ship smashed into the tree and exploded.

I slowed to a stop and rose, crouching behind a tree as I pondered my next move. I could hear Covenant troops in the forest farther down, and see the outpost a few kilometers in front of me.

I was stuck behind enemy lines.

"Hercules," I said into my COMM. "I need your help again."

9. II: Why We Fight

Chapter Three: Why We Fight

July 3, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Forest Near Echo Base, Spira.

Day 3 of the "Battle for Echo Base"

It was an hour past midnight, and once again the shining moon casts its stolen light upon the forest. The Covenant and UNSC forces had stopped their constant firefight and decided to rest and conserve ammo, making this my only chance to act. If I waited too long, the two lines would open fire again, as they had done countless times throughout the day.

I crouched under a large shrub, my breath coming in long sighs as I gazed through the trees and towards the silent outpost beyond. I could see the two, long lines of darkness lingering in front of the outposts, small flickers of light displaying within them; the trench lines.

I had been stuck in the forest since morning, hiding and remaining undetected while Covenant reinforcements travelled through the forests towards their trenches.

Boss had told me to remain COMM silent; taking the risk to contact the others may give away my position to any Covenant COMM-Interceptors listening in. It had been tough spending my time in enemy territory without hearing word from my Team; I felt alone

again.

A gentle gust of wind shook me from my thoughts.

I moved to the edge of the forest, careful not to make any noise and alert the aliens to my presence. If spotted, I would be reduced to a smoldering pile of ash and plasma in seconds.

I laid down on my stomach and began the long crawl back to the outpost, feeling the grass bend underneath me as I went.

I crawled at a steady pace, using my arms and legs to push my body along the plains and trying to keep as quiet as possible.

The journey was long and terrifying. Hundreds of things could go wrong; a lone Jackal Sniper lying in the grass could spot the rustling of the grass as I crawled. An Elite wandering through the fields in search of a place to empty his bladder could stumble upon me. The two forces could instantly engage in another firefight; a stray bullet or grenade hitting me and sending me to Oblivion.

Thirty minutes into my crawl I reached the edge of the Covenant Lines. I immediately stopped moving, hearing the whispered voices of Grunts and Jackals that stood watch below. My heart began to race as I listened intensively, trying to sense any sign that I had been spotted.

After ten minutes the sentries moved down the lines, patrolling and keeping watch for their Elite Commanders that lie asleep in the trenches.

I rose to a crouch and climbed into the trenches, the dirt below my feet creating tiny landslides. I hit the trench floor and immediately crouched again, scanning around for any sign of movement.

Twenty Covenant soldiers lay asleep around me, their breathing calm as they dreamed about the Great Journey. None had awakened; a good sign.

I had an urge to take out my Combat Knife and slay them all; but I quickly overpowered it. Not because I was worried about waking others in the process and alerting the entire Battalion, but for another reason.

These were soldiers. It didn't matter if they were Grunt, Elite, or Jackal. Human, or Alien. Good, or Evil.

They were all soldiers.

Soldiers had a code, a credo; well, at least the soldiers in Honor Team did. We believed that all warriors deserved a true warrior's death. Not a death by assassination, or poison, or betrayal, or justice. They all had honor, and we believed that they deserved to die on the battlefield; with their honor still intact.

They were soldiers, and I respected them; for now. I would give them the honor they deserved and let them sleep through the night, but tomorrow, when we met on the battlefield again, I would slaughter them all.

Honor is a powerful thingâ€!

* * *

><p>After passing through the Covenant lines, it had taken me another hour to crawl back to our own. Crawling through "No Man's Land," the land between the two trenches, was an experience I will not soon forget. Rotting, Covenant bodies lay everywhere, their blood dry and flaky. The smell of the dead was horrifying, and it even managed to make its way through the air filters in my helmet. I waded through the bodies, keeping my eyes towards the ground as I pushed the corpses of Grunts and Jackals out of my way. The grass was covered in splotches of the ooze, a testament to the graveyard around me.</p>

A graveyard with no gravestones.

When I finally dropped down into the UNSC trench lines and into safety, I drifted to sleep, extreme exhaustion overtaking me. I didn't think about heading to the Command Center and reuniting with my Team. I didn't think about finding Deseron and reassuring him that I was still alive.

I didn't think about anything.

Just sleep. Rest. A moment to escape this world, if only for a second.

If only to escape the horrors that lie ahead of me.

* * *

><p>"I brought you some breakfast." came a soft voice, waking me from my sleep. 'sleep' wasn't technically the right word, actually; it was more like the limbo between being asleep and conscious of your surroundings at the same time.</p>

Boss dropped down into the trench beside me and handed me a plate full of fried eggs, their delicious odor seeping through my helmet and intoxicating me.

"Thanks." I replied as I took the plate, setting it down beside me as I removed my helmet. The helmet separated from my armor with a loud hiss. I set it down beside me as well, rustling my armored hand through my hair as I felt the cool breeze on my skin.

"By the way, welcome back." chimed Boss as she sat next to me, her golden visor lifted to the sky.

I remained silent, filling my mouth with eggs. I hadn't eaten in over a day.

"Vanguardâ€!" she started.

"It won't happen again." I cut her off, staring into her visor. It had been so long since I had last seen her faceâ€!

"What?" she replied, puzzled.

"I did it again; I acted without thinking, and it almost got me

killed. It was a stupid idea, but I did it anyways. It's my curse." I admitted, lowering my head.

"It's not a curse, Van. Every time you'd put your life on the line or do some totally ridiculous stunt, it was to help save or protect someone. You value the safety of others more than you value your own." She protested.

"No; you're wrong. I couldn't protect Princess. I couldn't protect Tigerâ€|and I couldn't protect Sage." I replied, my appetite gone.

Boss grew silent, no doubt speechless.

"Bloody Hell! Look who it is!" I heard Deseron shout in shock as he spotted me from across the line, dropping the ammo crate he was carrying and running over to us. I quickly put my helmet back on, hearing it snap in place as it reconnected with my armor.

"What happened, man? Last time I saw you, you were in a smoking phantom and dive-bombing into the forest!" exclaimed the Lieutenant as he reached us.

I looked up at the soldier, just in time to see him jerk to the side as a needler spike dug itself into his ribcage. He gurgled and flew backwards, slamming his back into the trench wall as he clutched the spike protruding from his armor.

"ENEMY FIRE!" I shouted, realizing that the other soldiers present in the trenches were shouting the exact same thing. I grabbed my MA5B and took cover, glancing back to Boss as she tried to keep Deseron calm.

"Damnitâ€|that's gonna leave a scarâ€|" mumbled the lieutenant as he stared at the spike, his breath heavy.

"Stop talking. MEDIC!" shouted Boss as she kneeled beside him.

Suddenly the air was cluttered with plasma fire, forcing everyone to duck their heads or lose them. All over the line soldiers were getting into position, dropping their breakfast and grabbing their guns and helmets.

"Get him out of here!" I said to Boss as I traded pot shots with the Covenant. She gave me a nod, grabbing the lieutenant and carrying him back towards the Command Center. Miraculously she wasn't hit by any stray fire.

I turned my attention towards the fight, spotting a Jackal and two Grunts as they leaped from behind their lines and rushed towards ours. I opened fire, the bullets slamming into one of the Grunts and sending fragments of its armor and flesh flying through the air. It dropped, blood seeping from its wounds like a geyser.

Suddenly aware that I was targeting them, the Jackal yelped and grabbed the last grunt, using it as a meat shield. I burst into laughter at the sight of this, pulling the trigger and causing the grunt to flail and jerk as twenty bullets dug into its body.

The Jackal dropped the corpse in its hands and began to panic, waving its hands in the air and screaming. It was actually quite entertaining.

I heard the crack of a Sniper Rifle behind me and the Jackal dropped to the ground, a smoke trail appearing where its head had just been. Motherfucker! That was my kill!

I growled and turned my head back towards the Outpost, spotting Zeke lying on the roof of a building a kilometer away. He gave me a thumbs-up, mocking me.

"Fuck you." I mumbled into the COMM, causing him to chuckle in response.

I turned back to the battle.

Over a hundred Covenant troops had jumped from their trenches and were pushing towards ours, their cover fire keeping us down and pretty much unable to return fire. Miraculously, the barricade line behind us were able to fire back, keeping the Covenant at bay for now.

I focused my fire on the Grunts and Jackals, trusting the soldiers around me with concentrating their fire and taking down the Elites.

A Grunt struggling to climb out of the trench suddenly found that there was a bullet in its skull, and a pack of Grunts setting up a plasma turret nearby fell in bloody heaps as I slaughtered them.

I dropped back behind the trench to reload, releasing the empty mag and slapping a new one in less than two seconds.

I took a breath and stood, instantly firing on a Jackal Skirmisher sprinting towards our line. It dropped dead, revealing a Grunt behind it throwing a plasma grenade towards my position.

I cursed as I ran left down the trench line, away from the grenade as it bounced into the trench a few inches from where I had just stood.

"GET DOWN!" I yelled as I grabbed a soldier nearby, shoving him to the ground with relative ease. I hit the deck as the grenade exploded, creating a large crater and sending debris raining down on us.

"Thanks, sir." Mumbled the soldier as he stared at the crater behind us, as if he was completely surprised that he was still alive.

I watched in horror as a second grenade fell into the trenches, sticking to the soldiers head instantly.

"SHIT!" I shouted as I crawled backwards, away from the soldier.

He stood and began to panic, tears flowing from his eyes as he began to feel the grenade melt his skin.

"It hurts! It hurts!" screamed the soldier as he stumbled towards me, the light on the grenade getting brighter every millisecond.

"Help me! Help me!" he shouted, his eyes wide and his face full of complete fear. He was a few feet away from me, aware that we would both be sent to oblivion in a matter of milliseconds.

I acted on instinct; without thinking. To this day I would never forgive myself for doing that. Not this time.

I kicked the soldier in the chest, sending him stumbling backwards a few feet; a few precious feet. His face was overwhelmed by shock; he was aware that I had abandoned him.

The grenade exploded, sending a shower of flesh, bone, organs, and blood onto my armor.

I looked back at the spot where the soldier had been, seeing only a blackened crater on the ground.

Let it go; I told myself. Don't dwell on it. It will only slow you down.

I grabbed my rifle and stood, turning my attention back to battle.

The soldier never crossed my mind again.

More and more Covenant troops were charging from their lines, making this the strongest assault they've made yet. Dozens upon dozens of alien corpses littered the ground, but more still came.

Our front lines were hard pressed to keep the Covenant advance at bay, with support from the barricade line being the only reason we were still in the trenches and not slaughtered. The Covenant were lobbing grenade after grenade into our trenches, disorganizing our defenses, destroying the structure of our trenches, and keeping our heads and morale down. Jackal Skirmishers reached our trench lines constantly; their agile, nimble bodies helping them avoid our fire. For each Skirmisher that penetrated our line, five soldiers would be killed.

Our front line was being torn apart.

I continued to fight, killing a pack of Jackals trying to slip into a crack in the trench line to my right. A trio of soldiers quickly moved to the crack, hinting to me that they would take care of that problem. I would hate to get flanked and shot, that's for sure.

An Elite was able to reach the line, its plasma rifle glowing as it fired at me. Two plasma charges splashed onto my chest, causing my alarm to sound and my shields to fail.

I immediately returned fire, emptying a full clip into the Elites torso. The Elite dropped, clutching its chest as it died.

I cursed and dropped to a crouch, waiting for my shields to recharge. I took a glance to my right, spotting three Elite Minors standing over the charred bodies of the three soldiers who had been at my side mere seconds ago.

The Elites all raised their plasma rifles, intent on melting my armor

and burning my skin to a gooey paste.

Hercules charged into the trench, tackling two of the Elites with the force of a train and slamming them into the trench wall. I took the opportunity and charged at the third Elite, who was awestruck at the sight of the red Spartan.

I reached the alien in seconds, wielding my combat knife and digging it into the Elites neck. I pushed the Elite to the ground, my knife still in its neck as it began to slowly die.

I stopped, surprised to see Hercules stand and give me a nod. The two Elites he had tackled were slumped against the trench wall, ones skull bashed in by the butt of the Spartans shotgun and the other dying of a crushed ribcage from the power behind the Spartans tackle.

"Thanks." I said to him, truly meaning it.

"That's' twice that I've saved your life, Van." Replied Hercules as he scanned the battlefield.

"Stop reminding me!" I mumbled, embarrassed.

He turned back to me, his gold visor reflecting the suns light. "Get your head in the game. I'm not always gonna be there to save your ass."

I lowered my head. He was right.

"Covenant Armor!" I heard Zeke shout through the COMM, a blue arrow appearing on my visor that pointed towards the forest.

Twelve Covenant Wraiths broke through the trees, their cannons ablaze as they sent plasma mortars soaring through the air. Fifty Elite minors walked along the tanks, escorting them to the battlefield.

It didn't make any sense; I had been in the forest all day yesterday but didn't detect any signs of a company of tanks. There was no way the covenant could have sent reinforcements so quickly without us knowing; their Cruiser had left the area two days ago!

The mortars splashed into the trenches, the first volley completely destroying the left edge of our trenches and killing at least ten of our soldiers and wounding twice as many. The Wraiths continued to send volleys of plasma at our front lines, shattering our line of defense.

It was complete chaos. Soldiers ran everywhere, shouting as they fled from the mortars and the waves of Covenant troops pouring into our trenches. Legs and arms lay around, their owners either dead nearby or leaving the appendage behind.

"Retreat! Head back to the outpost!" I heard Boss shout through the COMM, realizing that she was broadcasting on all nearby channels. I was glad to know that she was still alive, fearing that she had been killed during the battle.

"Honor-Three, Honor-Two; provide cover fire and allow our soldiers time to retreat without being massacred! That's an order; get it

done!" commanded Boss.

I glanced at Hercules, who raised his shotgun over his shoulder. "You heard her."

We ran down the trenches, killing all Covenant troops we came into contact with. Bodies, both human and covenant, littered the trench floor, their blood painting the dirt.

"Grab that ammo crate!" yelled Hercules as he pointed to a box coming up on my right. I obeyed, picking up the crate and continuing to follow my Squad mate.

We reached the Front Line Command Nest, which was an area atop a small dirt hill, located at the center of the trench line and surrounded by sandbag barricades. A small wooden roof was above it, being supported by four poles. It was a place for the commanding officers to reside on the frontlines, while staying a little more protected than if they were to be on the trench line.

We entered the Nest, spotting Boss as she fired down at the Covenant troops in the trenches.

"I didn't think we'd find you here." I commented, dropping the ammo crate and taking a mag from inside it.

"Save your breath and start firing. We have a job to do." replied Boss, her focus never leaving the battlefield.

I grew silent and joined her, resting my rifle on the sandbag barricade.

"I'll cover the rear." I heard Hercules say behind us.

I turned my head towards Boss, trying my hardest to melt her helmet so I could see her eyes; read the emotions on her face.

"I'm sorry." I told her.

"Focus." was her reply.

Yes sir.

* * *

><p>We spent an hour in the Command Nest, firing off bullet after bullet as we tried to help our soldiers retreat to safety. Hercules had to leave the Nest three times and scavenge for more ammo crates, with each crate holding over a thousand 7.62 rounds. We had emptied five of them.</p>

I had consciously taken a Covenant body count; burning each kill in my brain. For every UNSC soldier I saw fall in combat, I would kill five Covenant troops.

Seventy nine. I had slaughtered seventy nine Covenant soldiers.

When all of the remaining soldiers positioned on the front lines had retreated back to the outpost, we immediately left the Nest; heading back to the barricade line.

The Covenant had completely taken our front line, using the cover it provided to regroup and prepare for their direct assault on the outpost itself. Their numbers were in the hundreds, while ours had dwindled to below a hundred.

The Wraiths had positioned themselves behind the Covenant line; a perfect position to cripple the entire outpost with mortar fire.

No shots were fired; the first half of the battle was over. Now both sides lied in wait; eager to see what the other would do next.

We all knew it was inevitable. We were destined to lose Echo outpost.

There was no way we could win this battle. It was only a matter of time.

* * *

><p>"Tell me you've got some good news, Gizmo." spoke Boss as we patrolled the barricade line. The battle-weary soldiers on the line glanced at us as we past, their spirits rising a tiny bit as they realized that the Spartans were still with them.</p>

"The BattleNet is back online; the UNSC must have been able to repair the COMMs Relays sometime within the past few hours." I heard Gizmo reply through our COMMs.

"Bout damn time." mumbled Boss.

"The Covenant owns the sky above the province, so direct air support is still prohibited." Gizmo replied.

"How do they still own the sky? We haven't seen any Covenant spacecraft in over two days?" I asked, curious.

"Because the Cruiser is still above us." said Zeke as he walked towards us.

"What?" Boss and I shouted in unison, completely in surprise.

"Look at the sun." ordered Zeke as he pointed towards the sky. We obeyed.

I saw the blue sky, and the white clouds. That's it. No sun was visible; as if it had vanished.

"What the fuck; it's gone!" I shouted in surprise.

"Not gone; hidden from view. The Cruiser is blocking it." reported Zeke.

Noone had noticed the absence of the fiery orb in the sky; we had been too focused on the battle. Who the fuck takes the time to look at the sun, anyways?

"It's cloaked; who knows how long it's been up there." added Gizmo.

"That would explain the sudden Covenant reinforcements and the Wraiths!" muttered Boss.

"Exactly." nodded Zeke. "The Cruiser has been here this whole time."

"We need to get out of here, and soon. If the Covenant are able to use the Cruiser to drop reinforcements around the entire outpost, then we'll be massacred." said Boss.

"Nova Company Delta Division was able to keep control of Haven; a small city located a few miles east. Haven is the only place nearby that UNSC aircraft can reach. If we have any hope of getting out of here alive, it's abandoning the outpost and getting to an Evac point in Haven." reported Gizmo.

"We were never taught to flee from a battle, Gizmo!" Boss muttered, worry in her voice.

"The battle is already lost, sir." Gizmo replied.

"Then that's our plan." I heard a familiar voice say from behind us.

I turned to see Deseron limp towards us, his left hand wrapped in a sling and his bare chest covered with linen bandages. He looked liked hammered shit; but the sight of him still raised our spirits.

"Deseron!"

"Lieutenant!"

"Sir!"

The soldiers around us spotted the lieutenant and gave sharp salutes, smiles on their faces as they saw their commanding officer.

I shook his hand, grinning. "Good to see you again, friend."

"Did you think I'd die that easily?" he asked in shock, a wide grin on his face.

"You had a spike sticking out of your chest, lieutenant." I reminded him.

"I just had the wind knocked out of me, that's all!" he laughed.

"It's great to see you, Deseron; but we have a dire situation and could use your help." said Boss.

"So I've heard." He replied. "Gizmo is right; the battle is lost, there's no reason for us to stay here. We'll head for Haven, and hopefully that last ship home. I'm not letting any more of my men die."

Boss nodded, "agreed. Order your men, Deseron; we leave within the hour."

* * *

><p>I looked back, spotting the cluster of buildings that made up Echo Base a mile away. The Covenant Cruiser had decloaked, hovering over the outpost and casting it in shadows. Dozens of Phantoms swarmed around the ship, carrying the soldiers on the ground back into the Cruiser. They had won the battle, meaning there was no reason for them to stay on the battlefield.<p>

A bright light began to form under the Cruiser, and a beam of white radiance shot from its belly and hit the outpost below. The air around the outpost seemed to brighten and heat, vaporizing the buildings and the ground below them. I could feel the rush of air even from this far away, and feel the air scream as it was heated by the blast.

"They're glassing the base." I heard Gizmo say behind me.

"Keep moving." Boss said as she passed me.

I obeyed, looking back at the outpost one last time before continuing down the road, along with the others.

* * *

><p>It was late in the afternoon when we reached the city. We were tired, and had been walking for hours; the sight of seeing Echo Base glassed still burned into our minds.<p>

the city on the horizon was in flames; a Covenant Cruiser hovered over it, while UNSC frigates surrounded it, exchanging fire with the behemoth. distant explosions erupted in the city, and the sound of gunfire could be heard from a mile away.

we had reached Haven.

H:V

10. II: War Briefing

Chapter Four: War Briefing

Excerpt from UNSC Nova Company Admiral James Hawke's "Report on 'The Battle of Spira.'"

** I had visited Haven a week before the invasion. I remember stumbling into a small girl, who had dropped her chocolate-chip cookie into the sewer drain. I had comforted her and got her to stop crying; telling the girl that I would buy her an entire truck full of cookies. She had hugged me, surprised that I would be so kind. The next day I had ordered the cookies; they would've arrived in nine five days!**

The attack on Spira was a complete surprise; we were caught completely off-guard. We believe the Covenant were first able to scan human activity on Spira, and locate our COMM Facilities. With our global communications and Defense Grid offline, we would be unable to mount an effective defensive strategy or counterattack; giving the Covenant the element of surprise AND the upper hand.

On the morning of July 1**st****, the Covenant managed to sneak Phantom Dropships into our atmosphere, using stealth camouflage and radar jammers. The Phantoms headed straight for our COMM Centers, taking most of them out in less than two hours; dropping our BattleNet Communications and disabling the Orbital Defense Grid.
**

**Within the next hour Covenant Cruisers exited slipspace and entered the atmosphere, decloaking and casting shadows on the cities below. Seven cruisers occupied our airspace while other frigates kept our ships in space at bay. Spira was cut off entirely from air support and our reinforcements; we were trapped. **

The Covenant hammered our forces with a fierce offensive, conquering cities and forcing our armies to retreat and regroup. We were separated and disorganized, and unable to provide air evacuation and support to our soldiers.

**Survivors in enemy territory have given reports of the Covenant digging into the ground; searching for something. We also know that the Covenant now occupy the area around Gamma Halo, keeping our recon ships away from the area. The Covenant are searching; digging on Spira for some kind of clue on how to get into the Halo and activate it. **

**We need help. The Covenant Fleet is larger than we anticipated, and their leader, an Elite General known as Odin, is more than capable of leading another Covenant Empire. Spira is now a battlefield, not a colony. If the Covenant is able to find a way onto Gamma Halo; all will be lost. If the Covenant are able to uncover the secrets of Spira itself; all will be lost. It's Reach all over again, sir.
**

We need to act now; we need the entire UNSC army aboard Frigates and en route to Spira immediately. If we lose this planet to the Covenant, it will be the end of time itself.

** -End Transmission **

11. II: The Fallen

Chapter Five: The Fallen

John-117

**Date (Unknown: ANOMALY) / Location (Unknown: ANOMALY) (Last recorded location 'Paradigm System, en route to Actual-5261 Spira.')
**

"Chief? Chief can you hear me? Damnit; wake up, John!"

I bolted upright, pushing a cluster of debris off of my chest. I coughed violently as I pumped air in and out of my lungs, the organs burning from lack of use. My heart was racing, and I feared it would explode with every beat.

My entire body ached, and my bones felt like they had been dipped in acid. My helmet was missing, revealing a long, jagged cut above my

left eye; blood falling down my face and dripping into my eye.

"Chief, are you ok? You're vitals were all over the place; I couldn't tell if you were unconscious or dead." I heard Cortana say, concern in her voice. She stood atop a small construct a few feet away from me, her blue figure wavering in the air.

I stood, taking the time to scan my surroundings.

I was still inside the Dawn, or what was left of it. Pieces of the walls were dented, scarred, and missing; allowing ice cold air to seep into the wreckage. Sparks flew from dangling wires and machines, and the lights on the roof flickered dimly. Debris completely covered the floor, with pieces of the walls and ceilings collapsing with sharp screeches.

A low groan echoed through the ship as it continued to slowly tear apart; as if the Dawn itself was crying in pain.

"What happened? Where are we?" I asked the AI, searching around the room for my helmet.

All I could remember was the bright light of the portal as we drifted towards a dark planet, the light absorbing us as we passed into the unknown.

"We must have crashed on the planet. This is strange; I can't pinpoint exactly where we are, I can't even tell if we're still in the Milky Way!" answered the AI.

I spotted my Helmet across the room, sticking out of a pile of rubble. "We can't stay here."

"Agreed. I'd advise our next course of action, but I know you'll just do your own thing; it's gotten us this farâ€|" Replied Cortana, sighing.

I grinned, walking to the rubble and retrieving my helmet. I let the debris fall off of it before sliding the dark green helm onto my head.

The visor was barely functioning; the screen was cracked in the center and most of the armor's systems had been disabled during the crash. The visor still displayed my shield levels, but all other features were offline.

"Time to move, Spartan." I heard Cortana say, her voice resonating through my helmet.

I stumbled through the wreckage, my armored feet clanking as they hit the debris and metal that cluttered the floor.

I felt my left foot knock against a rectangular object, causing it to slide forward and into my sight. I looked down, spotting the MA5B assault rifle on the floor, completely intact. I quickly picked up the weapon, feeling the familiar weight in my hands as I checked the magazine inside it; half empty. I attached the rifle to the magnet on my back, hearing it snap in place.

The rifle was kind of a good luck charm for me; it had remained at my side since the battle for the Earth. I felt comforted to know that it was in my possession again.

I searched around the floor, finding five magazines full of 7.62 rounds for my rifle. I snatched them up and attached them to my utility belt. I continued onward.

I entered the main hallway of the frigate, which was mostly still intact save for the wall of rubble that stood ahead of me; a dead end. I could see small rays of light emerging from cracks in the wall of debris.

"Looks like that's our ticket out of this ship." remarked Cortana.

I stood in front of the wall, feeling around for a weak point to exploit. I eventually found a thin, metal plating that made up the bottom left section of the rubble wall; perfect.

With a grunt I kicked the thin metal, denting it upon impact and sending it flying a few yards away. A large ray of sunlight rushed into me the moment the metal left the ship, instantly warming me and sending fresh air through my helmet.

I stepped out of the ship, hearing my boots crunch as they collided with the rocks and dirt below. I walked a few meters forward, before stopping at the edge of a cliff as I gazed in awe at the world around me.

Mountains, grasslands, tundra's, and deserts stretched for hundreds of miles in all directions; but instead of disappearing over the horizon, curved upwards for miles, before meeting over a thousand miles above me and creating an impossible circular landscape. I lifted my head to look at the "sky," and was completely shocked to see an ocean and a forest that stretched for miles above me. Not a drop of water from the ocean above fell, leading me to believe that somehow the laws of gravity still applied in this spherical world.

A massive orb of bright light hung in the center of the spherical world, illuminating the entire landscape and functioning as an artificial sun.

The Dawn had crash landed atop a giant canyon; rocky cliffs and mountains casting shadows around the ship. A large waterfall fell from a mountain a kilometer above me, the water dropping to my right and disappearing in a fog of mist hundreds of feet below.

"Whoaâ€¦an artificial, spherical, inhabitable, atmospheric worldâ€¦this is amazing." Mumbled Cortana as she used my visor to gaze at our surroundings.

"How is this possible?" I asked her, still staring at the stretches of land above me.

"I don't know. It's possible that the Forerunner's built this place; it's design and advanced technological levels are quite similar to that of the Installations and the Ark." She replied.

"A Shield World?" I asked her. We had found out that the Forerunners had built massive bomb shelters around the galaxy; places for them to

retreat to when the Halo Array were activated.

"Maybe. The planet we were drifting towards, 'Spira,' appeared to be constructed of the same forerunner technology as the Halos, which would support your 'Shield World' theory. Also, the portal we were sucked into may have been a sort of doorway; leading into the center of Spira, and coincidentally, the inner safety of the Shield World." Replied Cortana. "If you're right, and this IS a Shield World, then maybe there are others here; maybe some of the Forerunners were able to make it here before the Halo Arrays were activated."

"There's only one way to find out."

* * *

><p>I followed the edge of the canyon downward, instinctively scanning for any signs of danger. The dirt path was ragged and steep, leading down into a crevice between two mountains. I stopped and looked over the cliff again, spotting a large, gray object lying on the ground a few kilometers below. It took me a few seconds to realize that I was staring at the ruins of a destroyed UNSC Frigate, debris and rubble scattered for yards away from the ship. The front of the ship was buried into a crater in the ground; evidence that the ship had crash landed just like the Dawn. I turned my head and continued down the path.

There was no way anyone could have survived that crash.

* * *

><p>I continued to follow the path for an hour in silence, watching as the dirt trail was bathed in shadows. I looked up, seeing a giant mountain loom over me, blanketing everything below it in shadow.</p>

"I wonder how long it took the Forerunners to build something like this." I heard Cortana say in the back of my mind.

I retrieved my MA5B from my back and began to check the weapon for jams or malfunctions; a task I forgot to do when I had first found the weapon. I took apart the frame and checked the mechanisms inside the firearm, fixing any errors of jams that would have stopped the weapon from functioning properly.

"Any idea where we're headed?" Cortana asked, curiosity in her voice. I almost didn't hear what she said; I was focused on repairing my rifle.

"Anywhere." I finally answered.

"Chief, look." Cortana advised, a hint of worry in her voice.

I looked up from my rifle, spotting a large, metallic tunnel built into the side of the mountain.

The tunnel was constructed of the familiar Forerunner material that I had seen countless times before, and shaped in a large, rectangular hall. Darkness prevented me from seeing more than a few feet inside the tunnel, which instantly caused me to become cautious.

"You're not planning on going in there, are you?" asked the AI frantically as she noticed me quickly reassembling my rifle.

"That may be our ticket out of here; or towards the Forerunners." I replied as I reattached the frame of the rifle and clicked off the safety. Better safe than sorry. "We don't have any other choice."

* * *

><p>I entered the tunnel, activating the lights on my armor to help illuminate the darkness.</p>

The floor and walls of the tunnel were made of sleek, light gray metal. The howl of the wind outside echoed through the tunnel, creating an ominous atmosphere and sending chills through my spine. The tunnel was slowly sloping downward, into the dark depths beyond. I cursed as my footsteps echoed through the tunnel.

"I don't like the looks of this placeâ€|" mumbled Cortana as I continued to walk down the tunnel.

I looked back, hoping to see the ray of light that shone through the entrance to the tunnel; but all I could see was darkness.

"The temperature's dropping, we must be heading underground." Spoke the AI.

Suddenly the sound of footsteps filled the tunnel, as if something was sprinting towards me. I quickly raised my rifle and switched on the light attached to the bottom, illuminating the area a few yards ahead of me. The footsteps came to a sudden halt.

There was nothing there.

After waiting for what seemed like forever for the figure to reveal itself I continued onward, my finger against the trigger.

"I don't think we're alone in here."

* * *

><p>I followed the tunnel for a mile, reaching a dead end that halted my progress. The temperature had dropped to below zero, causing my breath to leave my helmet as vaporous fog.</p>

I spotted a rectangular door on the left wall, which slid open as I approached, revealing a transparent, hexagonal pad that replaced the floor. A pillar-like structure stood in the center of the pad, with glowing, alien symbols etched into it.

I stepped onto the pad and stood in front of the pillar, observing the strange, blue symbols.

A sudden shriek coming from the tunnel caused me to instantly turn towards the door, rifle at the ready.

"Chief; touch the pad, it activates the lift!" commanded Cortana.

I immediately obeyed and touched the pillar, causing it to glow a light blue. The door slid closed as the pad began to descend, down

into the depths of the unknown.

The lift slowed to a halt, hissing as it touched down with the metallic floor below. A door identical to the one I had used to enter the lift was built into the wall in front of me, sliding open when the lift stopped; a vacuum of darkness beyond the doorway.

I took a deep breath and stepped through the door, the flashlight attached my rifle swaying around the room.

I was in a large empty chamber, with large pillars standing in perfect symmetry around the room. Alien symbols were carved into the walls, each one pulsing a dim, blue light.

I slowly walked through the room, listening for any signs of movement nearby.

I reached the end of the room and another rectangular door, which opened to reveal a large slope leading farther down into the construct. The slope and a door on the far side of the chasm were the only things in the room, with the ceiling shrouded in blackness and the seemingly bottomless pit below.

"Don't fall." Cortana warned as I stepped onto the slope, trying my hardest to keep my balance. One slip and it was all over.

I continued to walk along the slope, my footsteps echoing through the room. I came to a halt halfway across the slope, lowering my head as a sound caught my attention.

I could hear the sound of heavy, sporadic breathing behind me.

I turned too late, grunting as a gray figure tackled me with unbelievable force and sent me flying through the air. My rifle was launched from my hand, the light on the barrel swirling around frantically.

I fell, losing sight of the slope above as I was engulfed in the darkest of shadows. I was powerless to stop my descent; my armor carrying me downward like an anchor.

Suddenly my body slammed against a hard surface with a loud thud, and a flash of bright light filled my vision as I instantly lost consciousness.

* * *

><p>"Chief!" I heard Cortana shout, dread in her voice.</p>

I swallowed in a large breath of air and opened my eyes, my heart racing as my mind started to panic. My bones felt like they were on fire, and I could feel several bruises scattered across my body. My lungs ached with each breath, and I could taste dry blood in the back of my throat.

"I'm ok." I reassured the AI as I struggled to stand. My legs gave out several times before I was able to stand, an intense feeling of dizziness overwhelming my mind.

Miraculously, I found my rifle a few feet away from me; completely

intact. I picked it up, using the flashlight to figure out where the hell I was.

I had fallen onto a small platform sticking out of a wall, with another rectangular door built into it. I shined the flashlight upward, spotting the slope I had fallen off of half a kilometer above me.

"That was some fall; a normal human wouldn't have been able to survive that." Commented Cortana, as if deep down she was wondering how I had survived the drop.

"I'm not human." I replied, before lowering my head and limping towards the door. The AI grew silent.

I clenched my teeth as I limped, quakes of pain bolting up through my legs with each step.

The door slid open to reveal yet another lift inside. I stepped onto the pad and touched the pillar in the center, causing the pad to drop slowly.

As the lift descended, soft light began to break through darkness, illuminating the lift in a dim glow. I shut off the flashlight on the MA5B, no longer requiring it to see.

The lift hissed to a stop, in front of a door built into the wall ahead of me. The door slid open.

I limped through the door and into a long hallway; glowing, blue orbs decorating the walls and brightening the room slightly.

I walked through the narrow hallway, my armor basking in the pale, blue light.

I stopped and crouched, hearing the faint sound of sporadic breathing from farther down the hallway. I could scarcely see movement ahead, immediately turning off the lights on my armor; trying to remain undetected.

I slowly continued forward, keeping close to the wall as I came closer to the figures ahead; their backs facing me as they sat in a huddle.

I activated the flashlight on my rifle and cautiously began to raise it, the light slowly passing over the floor and onto the figures.

The creatures were humanoid; with long, bony arms and legs and a skinny frame. Their skin was gray and rotting, chunks of flesh missing and showing the coal black muscle and blood below. They were bald, and veins pressed against their skin throughout their bodies. Their rose and fell rapidly as they breathed and snarled at each other.

"What the hellâ€|" I heard Cortana mumbled.

The five creatures immediately turned their heads towards me, their white eyes sending chills through my body. They shrieked in unison, their jaws wide and revealing hundreds of dagger-like teeth.

I backed away as they sprinted towards me, determined to rip me to pieces.

I opened fire, the room flashing as the rifle's barrel sparked brightly.

The creature closest to me was hit in the waist; the bullets tearing a chunk of flesh off of its body and leaving a hole in its place. The creature snarled and stumbled backwards before running towards me again, completely oblivious and unaffected by the wound.

I cursed and switched targets, sending a burst into the chest of another of the abominations. Three holes the size of quarters appeared in its chest, but the monster shrugged off the wound and kept coming towards me.

Panicking I fired again, sending a bullet clean through the monster's forehead. Its head shot backwards as bits of flesh and brain matter were launched into the air. The monster fell to the floor, lifeless.

The creature I had shot in the waist reached me in seconds, lunging towards me with its jaw wide. I quickly sidestepped, grabbing its head and slamming it into the wall to my left. The creatures head was crushed between the wall and my armored hand, caving in its brain and killing it instantly.

I quickly used my right hand to aim and fire the MA5B, knocking another monster off its feet as a burst of 7.62 rounds dug themselves into its brain.

Another creature swiped at my chest, scratching the armor with its claw. I punched the creature with my left fist, sending it flailing to the floor a few feet away.

I bashed the last abomination in the face with the butt of my rifle, shattering its skull on impact. It fell, its jaws still wide and eyes open.

The creature I had punched starting to stand, before dropping back to the floor; two holes appearing in its head.

I reloaded the rifle and checked the bodies, confirming that they were all dead.

"What are they?" I asked Cortana, hoping the AI would have an explanation.

"I don't know; we've never seen anything like this before. Their bodies are decayed and rotting, and its body parts seem misshapen and morphed beyond its normal appearance." The AI replied.

"Similar to the Flood." I murmured.

"Not exactly; check the chests. There aren't any intrusions or holes where the Flood infection form would have buried itself in order to take control of the body." corrected the AI. "Whatever they are, they're not Flood; and they're definitely not Covenant. I think we've found a new alien species, chief."

I glanced down at one of the creatures, wondering how many more of the beasts lurked in the shadows.

* * *

><p>I came to a door at the end of the hallway, which led to another closed door.</p>

The door slid open and I entered the room, quickly scanning the area as my rifle swayed from left to right.

The room was rather small, with rows of what looked like metal, alien pods cluttering the floor. Pods were built into the walls as well, with a terminal standing at the far side of the room; the black and yellow orb inside casting the room in a yellow glow.

A Lurker dropped from the ceiling and charged at me, its mouth ajar. I quickly fired, killing the creature with a burst to the face.

Another Lurker walked into the room, spotting me instantly and sprinting forward. I aimed carefully, putting a single bullet into the monster's skull.

I reloaded, letting the empty magazine fall to the floor.

When there were no more hostiles present in the room I lowered my weapon, examining the alien pods along the walls and floor. The pods were human-sized, with small blue wires connecting the pods to the terminal at the end of the room.

"What are these things?" I asked Cortana as I passed through the room.

"I can't say for sure," she replied. "Hook my data chip into that terminal."

I obeyed and walked to the terminal. I removed Cortana's data chip, feeling a rush of cold grogginess as the AI left my armor. I inserted the chip into a slot on the terminal, causing it to glow a deep blue.

"Strange; the data is written in the Forerunner language, but for some reason I can translate itâ€¦assessing the data files now." Spoke the AI.

I watched the doors while I waited, just in case some more Lurkers decided to walk in and attack.

"You were right Chief. This place is a Shield World; created a thousand years ago by the Forerunners in order to save a few members of their race before the Halo Arrays slaughtered everyone. A Forerunner known as 'The Overseer' was given full control over Spira, and helped save thousands of his species from the Halo's by bringing them back here." Reported Cortana.

"So there may be Forerunners still alive here?" I asked, beyond curious.

"I don't knowâ€|The Overseers logs state that the portal was closed before the Halos were activated, safely sealing them insideâ€|.butâ€|oh no." continued Cortana.

"What? What happened?" I asked.

"The Flood had followed them into the Shield World." She answered. "The logs continue; saying that the Overseer had to evacuate all survivors into these underground facilities, in an attempt to isolate themselves from the Flood. Only sixty of the remaining Forerunners made it here."

"Then what?"

"They decided to use the stasis pods in order to wait until the Flood were weakened by starvation, or reinforcements arrived to rescue them." Replied the AI.

I glanced around the room, staring at the pods around me. Were there living, breathing Forerunners inside them; continuing to dream like they had for thousands of years?

"I know what you're thinking, Chief; and the answer is no." said Cortana, her voice grim.

"What?" I asked, turning back towards the terminal.

"The construct was given a Forerunner AI to look after it; a monitor called '119 Stygian Solace.' Solace was tasked with keeping the facilities running, but apparently he sucked at his job. Five hundred years ago Solace went missing from the constructs records, causing the facility to slowly lose its main power and shutdown. Within a year, all secondary functions were deactivated, leaving only the ones necessary to keep the Shield World inhabitable, active. I guess the power keeping the stasis pods working was categorized by the mainframe as a secondary function." Reported Cortana. "They're dead."

A stasis pod at the back of the room exploded, sending shards of metal flying through the room. I cursed and hit the deck, narrowly avoiding a piece of shrapnel heading for my head.

I looked up, spotting a Lurker as it rose from the broken pod, screaming as it stretched its limbs. Its head turned towards me, and in seconds the creature had leaped across the room.

I tried to stand but was too late. The Lurker tackled me, sending us both sprawling backwards and across the floor.

I grabbed the monster with my left hand, sending my right fist into its face three times. The Lurker spat and sputtered as I hit it, its teeth shattering and falling out of its mouth.

I threw the alien across the room, its back slamming against another pod. I stood and shouldered my rifle, aiming it at the head of the monster flailing on the floor.

I pulled the trigger, and the Lurker moved no more.

I turned back to the terminal and removed Cortana's data chip,

plugging it back into my helmet.

I walked over to the dead alien on the ground, nudging its body with the barrel of my rifle.

"We didn't discover a new alien race, Cortana; we found an old one." I said to the AI.

I gazed at the lifeless beast, realizing that I was staring at the misshapen body of a long, dead Forerunner.

* * *

><p>The door at the end of the stasis room led into another hallway, which was empty.</p>

A door stood at the end of the hall, leading into a large chasm.

The chasm was massive, with rows of giant pillars rising into the air and out of sight. A large staircase was carved into the walls, leading up to other levels in the room. The ceiling was lost from view, and the walls seemed to stretch upwards for miles.

"This place is massive; I wonder what kind of artifacts the Forerunners left behind here." wondered Cortana.

"The sooner we leave this place, the better." I replied as I began to travel through the room.

A sharp shriek erupted from the pillar to my left, causing me to instantly raise my head and my rifle, the flashlight illuminating the metal pillar.

A 'Lurker' was hanging onto the side of the pillar a few yards above me, its face glaring at me. Its eyes were wide with bloodlust and saliva dripped from its jaws.

The Lurker dropped from the pillar and landed in front of me, its mouth wide as it snarled. I touched the Lurker's forehead with my MA5B, firing and spraying blood, brains, and flesh across the floor. The Lurker died, its body slumping to the floor.

"Watch out!" warned the AI.

I looked up to see dozens more Lurkers drop to the floor around me, all snarling and hissing. I backed away, back through the doorway.

The Lurkers all ran after me, the doorway acting as a bottleneck and forcing them to approach one at one a time.

I crouched and fired through the door, hitting anything that moved through it. The bodies of Lurkers began to pile up in front of the doorway, some of them alive and flailing while corpses slumped on top of them.

One Lurker was able to jump over the bodies and through the door, reaching me in seconds.

I quickly readjusted my aim and pulled the trigger, tearing the

Lurkers head from its body.

The rest of the Lurkers were smart enough to realize that running through the door was suicide, so they turned around and ran back into the room, using the pillars and shadows to hide.

I took the opportunity to reload, before moving towards the door. I quickly moved the corpses out of the way, using my boot to stomp the heads of the Lurkers that were still moving. They died instantly, their heads flattened onto the floor.

I slowly walked through the room, spotting a Lurker as it struggled to climb up a pillar nearby. I put a bullet in its brain, its body dropping and crunching as it hit the floor.

I continued through the room, my rifle swaying as I prepared for an inevitable ambush.

I spotted a Lurker stalk towards me, barely visible as it crept out of the shadows. I opened fire, catching the beast in the leg. The Lurker dropped to its knee, screeching as it struggled to reach me. A final burst caused a spray of gore to paint the wall behind it.

"Chief, behind you!" shouted Cortana.

I quickly turned around launching, my fist into the gut of a Lurker that had been attempting to sneak up on me. My fist cut clean through the alien's waist, reemerging from its back. I withdrew my arm from its body and kicked the Lurker away, firing a burst of ammo into its head as it fell.

More lurkers began to sprint at me from out of the shadows, with others jumping from the pillars above. I broke out into a run, trying to reach the door on the other side of the room before the monsters reached me.

I turned my torso slightly and fired pot shots at the creatures behind me, wounding some and causing them to slow.

I let the empty ammo magazine fall from the rifle as I reloaded, taking one of the last two ammo mags I had from my waist and slipping it into the rifle's frame.

I reached the door and turned around, facing the dozen Lurkers that continued to run towards me; eyes wide and mouths twisted in wicked snarls.

I pulled the trigger and didn't let go; a constant barrage of bullets escaping the MA5B and riddling the bodies of the aliens with holes.

The rifle clicked as the last bullet left the magazine. I immediately reloaded again, forcing the last magazine of ammo I had into the rifle.

I finished off any Lurker left alive with quick bursts to the head; their bodies falling limp, never to move again.

When nothing else in the room moved I lowered my weapon, turning

around and heading through the door.

I came into another empty hallway, with a lift located on the far wall.

I stepped onto the hexagonal platform and activated the pillar in the center, feeling a sudden rush of exhaustion as the platform began to rise. I held my rifle loosely in my hand, lowering my head as the elevator rose silently and fatigue began to take its toll. Even Cortana was silent; still in shock about what we had seen.

The pad continued to rise; I counted five minutes before it slowed to a stop. A metal, rectangular door stood in front of me, unwilling to open and reveal the unknown horrors that lay beyond.

I raised my rifle, heading towards the door slowly. It slid open with a hiss, blinding me with bright light. I used my hand to cover my visor, completely surprised as I stepped through the door and into the world beyond.

A large forest stretched to the east and connected with a long, winding river. To the west was a large tundra, with snow covered mountains looming in the distance. The large, artificial sun still floated in the center of the spherical landscape, with mountains, plains, and rivers replacing the sky above.

Behind me stood the door leading back into the underground tunnels, built into the side of the canyons. Smoke rose from inside a cluster of mountains a few miles away, marking the location of the Dawn's crash site.

"Looks like we're at ground level, now." Said Cortana.

An ear-splitting roar echoed through the mountains, sending chills racing through my spine. I turned towards mountains, my rifle in hand as I tried to spot the threat.

A large, gray creature fell from the mountain tops and landed directly in front of me, sending quakes through the ground and causing me to struggle to stay afoot. A shower of debris was launched into the air, and a fierce gust of wind blew through the grass and trees as the creature collided with the ground.

The behemoth was easily the size of a Pelican, with rotting skin and two large, thick wings swaying back and forth through the air. It had two hind legs, and a spiked tail that dragged along the ground like a mace. Bone spikes erupted on its snout and continued on down its spine. Sharp claws jutted from its feet, and hundreds of sword-like fangs adorned its jaws. Four glowing, white eyes stared back at me, pure demonic bloodlust resonating from them.

The beast continued to glare at me, its teeth showing as it growled. Saliva fell from its mouth, creating small puddles on the ground.

The beast opened its jaws and roared, sending a blast of acid towards me.

H:V

12. II: Fire Team Zulu

**August 25, 2544 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System.**

_I grinned as I stared up at the moon; mesmerized by its beauty. The light radiating from the floating orb seemed to fuse with the blades of grass around me, bathing them in a breathtaking, silvery glow.

-

"_It's beautiful!" whispered Boss as she lay beside me, her arms resting under her head. _

"_Yeah." I replied, my smile growing wider. "A year ago, when I was six, me and some of my friends use to climb the roofs of the buildings to gaze up at the stars."_

"_Do you miss those times? The life you had before all of this?" Boss asked, turning to stare at me with her beautiful, dark green eyes. _

"_Yeah. Sometimes." I answered truthfully. _

_We remained silent, our attention drawn to the moon again. _

"_Two years ago I wasn't called Vanguard. My name was Jack." I said, overwhelmed by memories. _

_Boss remained silent. _

"_You're not gonna tell me yours?" I asked, turning towards her.

-

A single, silver tear fell down her cheek as she continued to stare at the gorgeous moon above.

* * *

><p>Chapter Six: Fire Team Zulu

(The Battle for Haven, Part One)

Vanguard

July 4, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Rally Point Bravo, Haven.

"Lieutenant Deseron! Is that really you?" shouted a Sergeant Major as we reached the safety of Rally Point Bravo; a camp set up by the soldiers of Nova Company Delta Division outside of the outskirts of Haven.

"Aye, it's me. It's good to finally see you again, Sergeant Malone." saluted Deseron as the Sergeant reached him. The Sergeant laughed and shook Deseron's hand, glancing back at the one hundred soldiers of Nova Echo behind him.

"Is this all that's left of your battalion?" Malone asked, concern in his eyes.

"I'm afraid so; the Covenant hit us pretty hard back at Echo Base. We lost a lot of good men!" replied Deseron.

"We could see and hear the Covie bastards glassing the base a while ago; we feared that you had all been killed on the battlefield." remarked the Sergeant.

"It'll take a lot more than that to finish me off, old friend." grinned Deseron.

Malone laughed, "Aye, aye! Well, don't just stand there! Bring your men into the camp! We have rations, bread, and ammo to go around!"

The Sergeant grabbed Deseron's shoulder and led him into the tents ahead, with the rest of Nova Echo close behind. The soldiers began to shuffle into the camp, their heads lowered as the memories of their fallen friends still lingered in their minds. The troops of Nova Delta quickly greeted them, taking their burdens of weapons and gear and offering them meals to eat, water to drink, and tents to rest in. It was the least they could do.

I followed my Team into the camp, glancing up at the ruins of Haven. A Covenant Cruiser loomed overhead, blocking the sun and casting the city and the UNSC Frigates below in shadows. Fire, smoke, and the distant boom of explosions filled the city, electrifying the air and putting me on edge.

It was gonna be a long day.

* * *

><p>"Bloody hell, Deseron! You never told me you had bloody Spartans with you!" exclaimed Sergeant Malone as Honor Team entered the War Tent.</p>

The War Tent was rather small; consisting of a large, round, wooden table in the center and chairs resting around it. Crates and shelves were scattered against the walls, and stacks of paper rose from the floor.

Malone leaned back in his chair, his hands rustling through his short, brown hair. His skin was lightly tanned, and I noticed a small, red scar stretching across his jaw.

He examined us, his fierce, grey eyes observing our armor.

"I've seen my fair share of Spartans in my lifetime, but I've never gotten to see one of their faces." spoke Malone, possibly hinting for us to remove our helmets.

We remained silent; unmoving.

Malone sighed, realizing that his request was not going to happen.

"So how are things in Haven?" asked Deseron as he sat in a chair next to Malone, a cup of coffee in one hand. He still wore bandages over his waist and chest, and his left arm was wrapped in a sling.

Boss, Hercules, Gizmo and I decided to take a seat as well; Zeke preferring to stay standing, his arms crossed as he watched the door.

"Haven's a damn mess, that's for sure. The Covenant arrived in the area a few days ago, dropping battalions inside the city and wrecking havoc on everything in sight. The first day of combat was an absolute nightmare; UNSC personnel were evacuating civilians out of the city while our soldiers were busy holding back the Covenant. Thousands of civilians died that day." replied Malone as he glanced at Deseron.

"The UNSC were quick to provide reinforcements; sending the entire Nova Delta Division AND a squad of Hired Mercenaries to assist us before we lost control of the air. We fought for hours, clashing with the Covenant at every turn and fighting our hardest for control of one street at a time. Somewhere along the line we got surrounded and separated from the bulk of Delta Division; being forced to retreat back to the outskirts of the city and await word from the main force. We haven't heard anything from Delta Division yet; they probably have their hands full trying to retake the city."

"I seeâ€|" commented Deseron as he took a sip of his coffee.

"That's not even the worst of it! At the beginning of the attack General Calloway was killed on the battlefield, leaving Delta Division leaderless and scattered about the city! If we're unable to promote a new General soon, then we don't stand a chance against the Covenant offensive!"

"Our commander, General Hawke, was evacuated from Echo Base shortly before we were attacked; leaving me in charge of my battalion." replied Deseron.

Rank-wise Boss would be the next to take command if Deseron were to fall in battle, with both her status as a Spartan and her rank in the UNSC supporting her. I hoped it didn't have to come to that, though.

"God Damnit." cursed Malone.

"What about the Cruiser and frigates above the city? Why are they here?" I asked the Sergeant Major.

"The Cruiser's a Covenant Flagship; a mobile Head Quarters of sorts. Whether it commands the Covenant battalion below or the entire Covenant Fleet; we do not know. Its presence here does tell us one thing though; the Covenant must be planning to use Haven as their Base of Operations in this area." replied Malone.

"That would explain why they haven't glassed the entire city and reduced us all to ash." remarked Zeke.

"Exactly. Before we lost control of the sky, the UNSC had sent seven frigates to intercept the cruiser and destroy it; hoping to disrupt the Covenant chain-of-command and halt enemy reinforcements in the city. What the UNSC didn't expect though, was for the Flagship to emit a low frequency EMP, disabling the weapon systems and engines of every aircraft in the area; including its own. Now the ships are in a stalemate, waiting for their systems to come back online before they're reduced to rubble." finished Malone, taking Deseron's cup of

coffee and taking a long sip.

"Sounds like the perfect opportunity for us to board the Flagship and take it over." said Zeke, his visor pointed towards Malone.

"No. We'll worry about the Flagship later." replied Boss.

"You have a plan, Spartan?" Malone asked, curious.

Delta Division is leaderless, and as such, is ineffective in the battlefield as of now. We need to regroup the battalion, promote a new tactical leader, and organize a proper offensive. Only then can we drive the Covenant out of the city." answered Boss.

"Interestingâ€|riskyâ€|but possibleâ€|we may be able to rally the rest of Delta Division back here, to Rally Point Bravo; but that would leave the Covenant unsupervised and give them ample time to dig in and prepare for another attackâ€|" pondered Malone aloud. "Plus there's the issue of infiltrating the city and retrieving the rest of the Division without losing too many of our men in the processâ€|"

"I didn't say it would be easy." replied Boss.

"I highly doubt that five Spartans could make their way into a war zone, rally together over two thousand soldiers, and bring them back here alive." doubted Malone. He obviously didn't know what Honor Team was capable of.

"We have to try. That is our duty as Spartans." Boss answered quickly.

"We send in four squads; five soldiers maximum per squad. Squads small enough to sneak into the city and rally the troops." spoke Zeke as he walked towards the table.

"They would have to be skilled; able to eliminate Covenant soldiers without drawing too much attention to themselves." I added, realizing Zeke's plan.

"They would have to be experienced in espionage and guerrilla warfare; able to slip in and out of the battlefield in seconds." nodded Hercules.

"Almost like assassinsâ€|" commented Gizmo.

"Each squad would have to be led by a member of Honor Team; in case their cover is blown or they encounter direct confrontation." remarked Boss.

"Interesting idea, but we don't have any Ninja's in our midst." Malone replied.

"Noâ€|but you do have Mercenaries, correct? Find mercs capable of infiltration and send them into the city to retrieve the soldiers." concluded Deseron.

Malone stood, surprised. "This is insane! You'll just be throwing more lives away!"

"Noone said it would be easyâ€|" reminded Boss.

* * *

><p>We had decided to go along with Zeke's plan; it was a damn brilliant one. Malone had hand-picked fifteen Mercenaries present in Rally Point Bravo, each willing to participate in the operation.</p>

Boss had split us all into four squads. Fire Team Foxtrot; led by Boss herself. Fire Team Magma; led by Hercules. Fire Team Vixen; led by Gizmo. Fire Team Zulu; led by Zeke and I.

The other Teams had infiltrated the city half an hour ago; each entering in different locations. Zulu was the last team still inside Rally Point Bravo; Zeke and I waiting impatiently as the rest of our team prepared for the mission.

After a few more minutes the three mercenaries assigned to Fire Team Zulu stood in front of us; equipped, determined, and ready to go.

I looked at the mercenaries, examining them one by one.

There was Rohan; a caramel colored, black haired mercenary wearing a black suit of UNSC combat armor and a matching balaclava with night vision goggles above his eyes; a Wakizashi short sword attached to his utility belt and a M45 Tactical Shotgun in his hands. The shotgun looked heavily modified and expensive; probably stolen contraband. Rohan looked like your elite mercenary, and his reputation was high among the UNSC as a top assassin.

Next was Akiba, a rookie mercenary with short brown hair and hazel eyes. A Blue E.V.A Helmet was held in his hands and dog tags with the name "Sam Davis" hung from his neck. He wore light blue combat armor; a combat knife strapped to his chest. I glanced at the helmet, wondering how he obtained it and if it was still operational.

The last mercenary assigned to Fire Team Zulu was a grizzled Russian named Nicholai O'Corraidh. He was six feet tall, with raven black hair and striking emerald eyes. A black cross was tattooed on his forehead, and similar tattoos covered his arms and neck. A custom BR55 lay in his hands.

I remained silent as Zeke examined the mercenaries. They watched him as he walked by them, their fingers gripping the triggers of their weapons.

"They'll do." said Zeke as he approved the mercs. They all released a breath that they had been unconsciously holding in.

I nodded, "What's the plan?"

If rank was a factor then technically I would be under command of Fire Team Zulu; me being Honor-rank Three and Zeke being rank Four. But I decided to give Zeke control this time; stealth and espionage was his specialtyâ€|as well as Tiger'sâ€|

"We'll head for the eastern sector of the city; according to Malone's Intel, a platoon of marines were pinned down there by Covenant armor

and infantry. We'll move towards the platoon and assist them as much as possible before retreating back to Rally Point Bravo." Replied Zeke.

"Understood." Barked Akiba.

"Sounds simple enough." Remarked Rohan.

"We travel through the city under my lead; clinging to the shadows and staying undetected. We're a team of assassins, not a strike squad; no one fires his weapon without me or Vanguard's go-ahead. Understood?" spoke Zeke as he stared at the mercenaries.

They hesitated at first, before giving slight nods. They obviously didn't like being reduced to puppets controlled by Zeke; it was completely out of their comfort zone. They were trained as Lone Wolves, making their own decisions and getting the job done their way. This mission was going to be interesting.

Zeke jumped into the warthog parked behind him, taking hold of the wheel. "If we make it out of this alive, then the drinks will be on me."

* * *

><p>We left the camp and entered the city through Comet Avenue, an empty street nearby Rally Point Bravo that led eastward into the city. Zeke made sure to keep the warthog on the back roads and streets, not wanting to be spotted by any Covenant scouting teams.</p>

The farther into the city we got, the more obvious the signs of battle became. Buildings were crumbling and smoldering around us, and the bodies of civilians, soldiers, and Covenant troops cluttered the ground. Vehicles were parked everywhere, fire still rising from their frames.

Boss had marked a Nav Point on our HUDs using Intel Malone had managed to retrieve regarding the last known position of the platoon we were being sent in to find. The Nav Point pointed upwards and was positioned at the top edge of my HUD, "10.7 Miles" displayed in blue under it.

Zeke stopped the warthog in the middle of an intersection, the wheels screeching to a stop as the Nav Point read "8.9 Miles."

"We'll continue on foot from here. Taking the warthog any further would be too risky." Said Zeke as he jumped out of the vehicle.

We all nodded, jumping out and brandishing our weapons. We all knew he was right; the sound of gunfire and explosions had gotten louder the closer we got to our objective.

We sprinted to the end of the street to our left, slamming our backs against the wall of a brick building while Zeke peeked around the corner. I looked to my right, watching the three mercenaries beside me as they slid closer, weapons raised.

"I never did get to introduce myself; I'm Nicholai O'Corraidh, ten year veteran and survivor of the massacre of Alpha Sigma." The

Russian whispered to the Merc next to him, Akiba.

The massacre of Alpha Sigma was one of the Liberation Front's biggest atrocities during their war against the UNSC. In 2545, the Liberation Front had obtained knowledge of a UNSC spy amongst their ranks, stationed on the planet Alpha Sigma. The LF sent a battalion of soldiers to the planet, in search of the spy; they never found him. The General in charge of the battalion went berserk, ordering his men to shoot all LF personnel on the planetâ€|as well as any civilians that had connections to the UNSC. In three days, they had slaughtered fifty million people. On the fourth day the General had sent a message to his superior admiral about the events at Alpha Sigma. His message read: **We need more ammo**.

"Sounds like you've had a rough life." Akiba whispered back.

"Yeah. During the massacre, my brother Martin and I hid in a dumpster behind our house. We could hear the screamsâ€|the shoutingâ€|the gunshots." Nicholai continued, his voice grim.

"Hey, asshole; no one asked to hear your goddamn life story, ok? Get your fucking head in the game!" came a loud whisper from the mercenary in the black balaclava, Rohan.

"Sorry." Mumbled the Russian, his voice and head lowering.

"Both of you shut the fuck up; we're moving in silence now. No one talks unless they have something damn important to say or if there's a goddamn Energy Sword up your asshole." Hissed Zeke as he turned to them.

"Yes sir." Nodded Nicholai.

"Understood." Replied Akiba.

"Fuck you!" mumbled Rohan, turning his head to try and keep Zeke from hearing.

"The fuck did you say to me?" shouted Zeke as he stepped off the wall and walked towards the Merc. He stopped in front of Rohan, his visor a few inches away from the mercenary's face. "If you have something to say then step up!"

"N-nothingâ€|sir." Growled Rohan as he glared up at the Black Armored Spartan towering over him.

After a few seconds Zeke back off and returned to the front of the group, shouldering his rifle and turning back to me. "Let's move."

I followed him as he crouched and ran across the street, stopping behind an overturned truck.

Akiba and Nicholai were close behind me, with Rohan jogging a ways behind them. I looked back at him, anger boiling in my blood. I didn't like him. He reminded me of someone I knew a long time ago; someone who risked the lives of everyone I cared about with his "Lone Wolf" behavior.

Stranger.

Rohan was the same; arrogant, brash, easy to anger, known to defy orders. He was quickly becoming a problem, and we would need to solve that problem before he got us all killed.

* * *

><p>We left the street and headed through a back alley, our weapons swaying in every direction as we scanned for hostiles or possible ambushes.</p>

Suddenly Zeke held up his fist and slammed his back against a wall, lowering to a crouch. We all did the same, keeping silent as the sound of footsteps filled the alley.

A horde Covenant troops ran past the alley, heading farther down the street. We remained silent and still as they passed, our weapons pointing towards the street and our fingers on the trigger.

"We have the element of surprise; we can attack now and slaughter them before they go any farther!" hissed Rohan as he began to stalk to the edge of the alley, his M45 Shotgun aimed towards the troops passing by.

Zeke was instantly beside the mercenary, slamming him to the wall with his left hand; using his right to cover the merc's mouth.

"No. There's too many; let them pass." Ordered Zeke.

Three minutes passed before the troops had completely passed by, leaving the alley and the street ahead quiet again.

"What the hell is wrong with you? You let them go!" shouted Rohan as Zeke let go of him.

"We were outnumbered ten-to-one; we would have been cut down in seconds had they spotted us." Answered Zeke, keeping his voice surprisingly calm.

"We had superior positioning! We could have killed them all!" Shouted Rohan as he raised his shotgun at Zeke's chest. "How many more of our men are they going to kill now?"

Nicholai and Akiba pointed their guns at Rohan in response, no doubt willing to pull the triggers if needed.

I immediately grabbed the barrel of Rohan's shotgun, wrenching it out of his hands. "Raising a gun at your superior? You have no honor."

"I was looking out for the safety of the team. If you wanna desert the team and go hunt the covenant, then by all means; go." Said Zeke as he moved aside.

For a few seconds no one moved; everyone waiting to see what Rohan would do.

With a growl Rohan turned around and fell back in line, grabbing his shotgun from my hand as he passed.

I watched him go, sighing and shaking my head in

disappointment.

"He's becoming a major issue, Vanguard. I brought up his file using my HUD, and he's deserted his unit before; being sentenced to six months in the brig before the United Mercenary Core bailed him out and welcomed him into their ranks." Came Zeke's voice from my COMM.

"I thought as much. I'll keep an eye on him." I replied, looking back at Rohan.

"Thanks, Van."

Zeke turned back towards us, his sniper rifle in his hands. "Let's go, Zulu."

* * *

><p>We followed the street to another intersection, taking another left and heading down another street named "Trinity Lane" .

Trinity Lane was a complete mess. Warthogs and Scorpion Tanks were in flames all around the street. The buildings had been reduced to rubble and debris, with fires filling the air with plumes of smoke. Street lights had fallen onto the road, their lights busted and shattered. Dozens of bodies lay everywhere; all of them UNSC soldiers. Their corpses were covered in blood and ash; some of their faces and appendages melted off by plasma charges.

"Bloody hellâ€|" I muttered as I stared at the carnage.

"Vy mozhete otdykhhat' v mire, tovarishchi." Said Nicholai as he bowed his head. My HUD immediately recognized the language as Russian, and translated it a few milliseconds later: _May you rest in peace, comrades_.

"I can't believe itâ€|is this the platoon we were sent in to retrieve?" asked Rohan, kicking a corpse at his feet and flipping it over, revealing a smoldering hole where the soldier's face would have been.

I kneeled beside a dead Lance Corporal, taking his dog tag and reading it. "Yeahâ€|"

I glanced up at the Nav Point on my HUD, the meter reading "0.1 Miles;" confirming that this was the correct platoon.

"Son of a bitch!" yelled Rohan as he kicked a tire below him, launching it into the window of a nearby building; shattering it on impact.

I lowered my head, realizing that the Covenant soldiers we had let pass a while ago had probably been the same ones who had slaughtered this platoon.

"Calm yourself, soldier; that's an order." Zeke advised Rohan, his visor pointing towards the sky.

"Fuck you! We all know who did this, and you let them get away

without a fight! This is all on you; all this blood, all this death! It's all on your hands! The Covenant were right; you Spartans are nothing but mindless Demons!" shouted Rohan, foam forming at the sides of his mouth as rage burned through his body.

Nicholai stepped in front of Rohan; the tip of his rifle pressing against the enraged mercs forehead. "Drop your weapon and get on the ground; you are emotionally compromised, AWOL, and as such you cannot continue to be a part of this mission."

The Russian was right; there was no place for emotional distress in a warzone. Stay focus; stay aliveâ€|stay sane.

Zeke, Akiba, and I stood in silence, uncertain as to what the mercenary would do.

Suddenly Rohan stepped forward, gripping the barrel of Nicholai's BR55 and shoving it backwards; the butt of the gun slamming into Nicholai's face and breaking his nose instantly.

Nicholai snarled in pain and dropped his weapon, using his hands to grip his nose. Rohan grabbed Nicholai by the shoulders, lowering the Russian's chest as he launched his knee guard into Nicholai's stomach. The Russian doubled over, his eyes wide as blood gushed from his mouth.

Rohan spun in a circle and lifted his leg, roundhouse kicking Nicholai in the head and sending him crashing to the ground a few feet away; motionless.

Akiba charged at Rohan, attempting to bash the merc in the head with the frame of his rifle. Rohan used both hands to grab the weapon, and pushed upwards; sending the handle of the rifle smashing into Akiba's jaw.

Akiba was lifted into the air by the force of the blow, a tooth falling from his mouth and hitting the ground below. Rohan gripped the rifle and slammed the barrel into Akiba's chest, caving in his ribcage and releasing the air stored in his lungs. Akiba gripped his chest as he struggled to breathe; his eyes wide with fear as he fell to the ground.

Rohan dropped the rifle, breathing heavily.

I turned to Zeke, who had remained motionless and silent till now.

"Van-" he started.

"Understood." I cut him off.

I dropped to one knee, placing my weapons on the ground as Zeke did the same. I removed my Combat Knife from its holster, setting it on the road beside my MA5B and M6D Magnum.

We stood, facing Rohan; who had dropped into a defensive stance, awaiting our attack.

Zeke turned to me, "Vanguard; use it."

I activated the MVES system built into my armor; causing trillions of tiny Nanomachines to spark to life and enter my muscles. I flinched in pain as the Nanomachines sent tremendous surges of electrical waves through my muscle tissue and blood stream, unlocking the hidden potential inside them and sending vast amounts of strength and energy to course through me. My skin and muscles began to heat; small vents built into my armor releasing steam into the air around me as it attempted to cool down my body. I looked down at my hands, seeing small streaks of electricity jump between my fingers and around my palms. I closed my hands into fists, feeling the surges of electricity run up my arms.

The amount of energy flowing through my body was enormous; I had never felt so alive and powerful in my entire life!

"Here I come." I warned Rohan, who was staring at me in complete surprise.

I leaped towards him, closing the distance between us in a millisecond. He didn't even have time to react; it was if he was moving in slow motion.

I dug my right fist into his stomach, arching his back as his eyes widened. I followed up with a swift kick to the left pelvis, which Rohan was able to block; saving the bone from shattering.

He took a swing at my head, and I grabbed his fist before he could complete the punch. He screamed as I tightened my hand, his knuckles cracking under the pressure.

Rohan kicked forward with his left foot, hitting me in the chest and sliding my body backwards a few feet; giving him enough time to recover and adopt his defensive stance again.

I cocked my head to the side, snapping my hands into fists again.

I charged him again, reaching him in milliseconds as I launched a flurry of punches towards his chest. He tried his best to block most of them, but too many of my hits were able to make contact. He staggered backwards, coughing heavily as I rushed him again.

I tightened my right arm and punched him across the cheek, causing a stream of saliva to eject from his mouth as his head was jerked to the side. He stumbled away and managed to regain his footing, no doubt dizzy and seeing stars. After a few seconds he dropped into his stance again, blood dripping from a cut on his lip.

I grinned; I had underestimated him.

Before I could charge him again he took out a small, metal syringe; stabbing himself in the leg with it and releasing some type of fluid into his blood stream. He tensed up and grunted in pain, his veins popping as the fluid took effect.

Adrenaline. A large dose of concentrated adrenaline.

"GRAAAHHHH! COME ON YOU SON OF A BITCH!" he roared, his hands clenched tightly.

I saw a black blur pass me, realizing nanoseconds later that it was

Zeke.

Zeke sprinted towards the mercenary, ducking under a kick intended for his head. Zeke shot two rapid punches into Rohan's stomach, the adrenaline keeping the mercenary from feeling the blows.

Rohan swung at Zeke's visor, who quickly side stepped and connecting his left fist with Rohan's cheek; the same cheek I had hit earlier.

The mercenary's balaclava was ripped in half, revealing a large gash on the side of Rohan's face. Zeke immediately smashed his right fist into the merc's face, snapping his head downwards and breaking the cartilage in his nose.

I rushed back into the brawl, slamming my fist into Rohan's jaw and lifting his head upwards in an uppercut.

"IS THAT ALL?" screamed the mercenary as he recovered almost instantly, kicking Zeke in the ribs and elbowing me in the face.

Rohan swung at Zeke's head again, who managed to catch the merc's arm and subdue it between his hand and his neck.

"Van!" Zeke shouted, cueing me to take the opportunity.

I lifted my foot and kicked forward into Rohan's exposed arm, the sole of my boot colliding with his elbow. His elbow shattered instantly and caved inwards, causing the bones in his arm to also snap. Rohan screamed in pain as his arm went limp, completely useless.

Zeke released Rohan's useless arm and punched him in the face, causing him to stumble towards me.

It was time to end this.

I kicked the MVES output to 60%, feeling an even greater surge of energy course though my body. I felt invincible; I felt like lightning!

The world around me began to slow; Zeke and Rohan's quick movements were slowed to half their normal speed. I glanced at Rohan's face, watching as a stream of blood slowly fell from his chin.

I jabbed at Rohan's chest, withdrawing my fist instantly. I jabbed again, this time with my other fist. Neither of my blows seemed to have any effect; as if I wasn't even hitting the merc at all.

Frustrated I shot my fists forwards again and again, each punch seeming to pass straight through the man's torso, leaving him unharmed. I kept punching and jabbing; 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28â€¢

37. 42. 59. 63. 71.

I began to aim my blows at different parts of his body; torso, legs, arms, shoulder, neck, head, face.

Uppercut, punch to the left cheek, jab to the ribs, elbow to the stomach. Repeat! Repeat! Repeat! Repeat!

A siren began to blare through my armor, and I could feel the Nanomachines in my body begin to rapidly deactivate. I shouted, throwing one last punch into Rohan's face, using all the strength I could muster.

The MVES system shut off, leaving me extremely fatigued and exhausted.

I dropped to one knee, struggling to catch my breath as my entire body began to ache.

I glanced up at Rohan, my eyes widening in complete shock.

Rohan stood before me; cuts, bruises, dents, welts, and blood covering his entire body. His balaclava and armor had been dented and ripped apart, revealing the wounds and cuts on his torso. His face was locked in an expression of extreme pain, and his eyes were now glassy and lifeless.

Rohan fell to the ground.

Dead.

* * *

><p>I sat in the corner of the War Room, my elbows resting on my knees and my hands clenched together and supporting my head.</p>

I will not record the thoughts and feeling that were flowing through me at that timeâ€œ|they're too painful to remember.

"Magma, Vixen, and Foxtrot were able to locate their specified objectives and led them back here. Zulu, on the other handâ€œ|" Boss glanced back at me, "was unable to retrieve theirs; they were all ready KIA."

Malone leaned back in his chair, a cigar in his hand. "I see."

"We were able to bring back over two thousand troops all together sir; everyone else is either dead, or still in the city." Concluded Boss.

"I'll send someone to gather all the Lieutenants; we need to promote a leader soon, before the Covenant is able to mount an offensive. After that's done we can begin forming strategies for retaking the city. Good work out there, Spartans." Said Malone as he stood giving us a swift salute. I was the only one who didn't return the gesture. With that, Malone left the tent.

Zeke stood and walked over to me, patting me on the shoulder before leaving the tent. He had some drinks he had to buy for some lucky mercenaries.

I remained seated, aware that the only other person in the room was Boss.

"In Ragnarok, all those years ago; you asked me what my true name was." Spoke Boss as she turned towards me.

I raised my head to stare at her, confused.

"It's Selene."

13. II: Peace Talks

Chapter Seven: Peace Talks

(The Battle for Haven, Part Two)

July 4, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Rally Point Bravo, Haven.

"Operation Archangel." That's what Deseron, Malone, and the other lieutenants were codenaming Nova Echo/Delta's final attempt to reclaim all of Haven from the Covenant. It was going to be massive; over two thousand UNSC troops would clash with around five thousand Covenant soldiers for possession of the city. Each side was fighting for every square inch; dying for control of a single street light.

The assault would commence tomorrow, July 5; Tiger's birthdayâ€|

Rally Point Bravo was bustling with soldiers running to and fro, arming every able body and preparing for the fight of their lives. Soldiers were huddled in corners around tents, sharing war stories and trying their hardest to distract themselves from the nervousness they felt deep inside.

They would all charge into battle tomorrow and only a few would walk on to tell the tale; if they were lucky.

I wasn't nervous. Wasn't scared, excited; angry. Nothing. No emotions. There was no place for them here.

I sat alone behind the War Tent, my helmet resting on the dirt beside me. The moon was glistening above me as I stared at the small traces of blood on my gauntlets.

Rohan's blood.

"Hey, Happy fourth of July!"

"Yeah, you too! My wife sent me a bouquet of red, white and blue flowers all the way from earth!"

I sat silently as the two soldiers walked passed, false smiles on their faces as they chatted. No one could wear a true smile here; not now.

I picked up the half empty bottle of Vodka and took another gulp, closing my eyes as the elixir caused my mind to go into euphoria. I placed the bottle back on the ground, beside the three empty bottles at my feet.

I don't drink; the last time I had had a drink was years ago when Bachelor had stolen a bottle of Scotch from some drunken guards. I don't know why I had decided to drink now; especially before a major battle.

Maybe it was to drown the guilt I felt for killing Rohan; maybe it was to cleanse my mind and try to forget my suffering; my troubles. Maybe it was because deep down, in my subconscious, I knew I was going to die tomorrow; and I was just enjoying one, last drink.

I would never know.

"You sure can pack in some alcohol, huh?" I heard Deseron remark as he took a seat next to me. He held his bowie knife in his free-hand, and held a wooden carving in his other.

I glanced at the carving; it was a picture of a Spartan fighting an Elite, with a faceless soldier lunging at the alien, his knife in hand.

"Spartans have stronger organs and brain functionality than normal humans, meaning it takes twice as much alcohol to get us drunk; or in this case, four times as muchâ€|" I replied as I took another gulp.

"Damn." was all Deseron could reply as he continued to carve his picture. I watched silently as small bits of wood fell to ground.

"But I need you tomorrow, Vanguard; and I don't want to find you dazed, hung-over, and ineffective on the battlefield." said Deseron as he turned to me.

"I'll be fine." I replied.

"No one blames you, ya know. I heard the whole story from Akiba; Rohan needed to be handled." Commented Deseron.

"Yeaâ€|handledâ€|not killed." I said.

"Shit happens." Shrugged Deseron.

"Did Malone and the others decide who's going to lead the offensive?" I asked the lieutenant. Boss and Malone had left to meet with the other lieutenants a few hours ago to promote a new General.

"Yeah. The vote was unanimous." Answered Deseron, who was instantly interested in a tiny hole in his piece of wood.

"Who'd they pick?" I pressed.

"Me." He answered, sighing. What the fuckâ€|

I let that sink in.

"You? Why you?" I asked as calmly as I could. It wasn't that Deseron was a terrible commanding officer; he had been injured in battle and STILL managed to make his way back to the frontlines. I just didn't think he would actually take the job.

"Because every soldier left in Nova Echo charged into the War Tent and demanded that I become General." He answered.

"Whoaaâ€|. " I commented in surprise.

"The other lieutenants were pretty convinced, I guess. So here I am, promoted to Brigadier General and leading two thousand men into the heat of battleâ€|no pressure huh?" Laughed Deseron as he finished his picture. He had carved a sentence on the top of the picture:

Spartans never die. I won't let them.

* * *

><p>"You remember the day before our Augmentations, when we were all at lunch and Lucky came up to our table with the glassiest, most unintelligent eyes we'd ever seen?" asked Gizmo as I entered his tent.</p>

"Yeah?" I replied, trying to figure out his logic.

"You have those eyes right now. You sober, bro?" he asked, chuckling as he tinkered with the Data Pad built into his gauntlet.

"Fuck you." I mumbled as I crashed onto his cot, the weight of my armor causing the frame to creak and drop.

He laughed, leaning back in his chair as he placed his gauntlet on the desk ahead.

"Hey Van?" chimed Gizmo, his visor turning towards me.

"Yeah?"

"Are you scared?" He asked, catching me off guard.

"About?"

"You know; tomorrow. This is the first time we've been in a battle this huge; anything could happen." Replied Gizmo, shaking his head.

"We've been through so much shit already; and every time, we've managed to rise out of the ashes. I won't let us fall. I'll never let us fall; we've come too far." I answered, memories flashing through my mind.

"â€|everything comes to an end, Vanâ€|what's gonna be our end? If this Covenant invasion starts another great war, then will Honor Team continue to fight in it? Will we be doomed to spend the rest of time in constant battle or die and be forgotten?" He continued, obviously asking questions that have been locked in his mind for a while.

"I don't know all the answers Gizmo; but we were all made for a reason, and I believe fate had a purpose for choosing us to become Spartans. Some humans were born to protect those they loved, and some were born to led nations and empires; but Spartans are different. We aren't humans, Gizmo; we're Demigods. We weren't made to protect loved ones, or nations, or humanity itself. We were made to protect

Peace." I answered.

Gizmo shook his head, grasping the meaning behind my words.

"Peace."

* * *

><p>I walked through the darkened path ahead of me; leading me deeper into the camp and passing by the tents and soldiers around me. I spotted Nicholai a few yards away, a bundle of blankets and a pillow under his arm.</p>

"Aye! Belyi Rytsar!" Shouted the Russian as he spotted me.

He had taken to calling me Belyi Rytsar instead of Honor-Three or Vanguard; it was Russian for "***White Knight***." I kinda liked it, even if it was really hard to pronounce correctly.

"How have you been, Nicholai?" I asked him as he reached me, shaking his hand firmly.

"Good, Good! I must thank you again for saving my life, my friend; if you had not slain the mercenary, then I would not be here. I will always be in your debt!" Smiled Nicholai in gratitude.

"I didn't save your life, Nicholaiâ€|" I sighed.

"Ah but you are just being honest, yes? Nevertheless, I am grateful for you, comrade. May we kill many Covie bastards tomorrow!" laughed Nicholai.

"What's up with the blankets?" I asked him, curious.

"Oh this? I'm heading into the countryside for the night. The moon is always magnificent before a bloodbath." Replied the Russian as he gazed upwards.

"Why's that?" I wondered aloud.

"My mum used to always tell me and my sister an old tale before bed:

The moon had two sons; Vosk and Blednyi. The moon bestowed upon each son a gift. Vosk received the power to move the oceans, and Blednyi received the power to scorch the earth with magma. And for millennia the two sons lived in harmony. One day humans began to populate the earth; setting up settlements on Blednyi's rock and sailing boats across Vosk's waters. The two sons began to argue over which of them was more beneficial to the humans; Vosk's oceans gave them water and life, while Blednyi's rocks gave them minerals and wildlife. The two sons fought for years, forcing the humans to choose sides and battle for control of the Earth. The war raged for centuries; Vosk drowned whole islands with tsunamis and hurricanes while Blednyi vaporized and transformed the oceans into more land. All the while the father moon sat alone, ashamed that his love for his sons had brought such evil and suffering.

So it is said that on the eve of every battle, the moon shines

brightest; calling out to his sons as they continued to fight and the humans that battled for them. The moon knew that when he rose into the sky the next night to gaze at the earth, only rivers of blood would be left below." Finished Nicholai.

I looked up at the massive, glistening, elegant orb above us.

It did look magnificent.

* * *

><p>I finally made it back to my tent, barely getting my head through the door when I was interrupted.</p>

"The wolves are on the hunt tonight." Spoke Zeke, who was leaning against the side of my tent; almost invisible in the dark of night.

"Spira doesn't have any wolves; or any kind of animals for that matterâ€¦except for us." I replied as I turned to him; seeing only the gold of his visor floating in the air.

"There are wolves here, but only one remains; a lone wolf. He's heading into the forest to kill some deer." Replied Zeke.

It took me a few seconds to realize what the fuck he was talking about.

"You're going into the city alone? Why not wait until tomorrow; there should be enough blood to satisfy you on the battlefield." I asked, confused.

"Hunters are more effective when they're not followed by loud, clumsy rookies. I need time to myself and doing what I do best helps me clear my mind." He answered.

"Boss is gonna be pissed if you leaveâ€¦" I reminded him.

"I'll be back before the battles over."

I grew quiet, too modest to admit my concern for my comrade. I couldn't stop him and deep down I knew that he would be better alone than forced to be on Deseron's leash.

He'd be ok.

"I'm not stopping you and I know trying to will be pointless." I sighed.

Zeke laughed and walked towards me, placing his hand on my shoulder. "You know me too well, Jack."

I instantly turned my head towards him, completely shocked that he knew my true name.

"Selene told me after the battle for Vessius; She thought it was best for the three of us to trust each other completely. We're the only true family we have left." Replied Zeke.

He was right. Boss, Zeke, Tiger, and I had been close through our

entire training; but when we lost Tiger, we had to put our trust into something else to replace the hole he had left.

"So you trust us?" I asked him.

"I do."

"Then tell me your true name." I persisted. Our true names meant everything to us; they embodied our souls and our lost lives.

Zeke began to back away, fading back into the darkness around us.

"Maybe another time."

* * *

><p>I dropped my head onto the pillow below me, my helmet sinking into the fabric and rendering it completely useless.</p>

It was a struggle to sleep comfortably in the cot while wearing full armor; but I tried my best. I hadn't taken off my armor since I arrived on Spira; I rarely did. The only time I ever completely took off my armor was once every six months; mainly to let my pale skin breathe and feel warm water upon my flesh.

"You have enough time to listen to Russian fairytales and talk to rookie soldiers but you don't have the time to come chat with your commanding officer?" I heard Boss huff through my COMM.

I sighed. So much for sleep.

"You didn't cross my mind; that's all. Where are you?" I asked, hearing the howl of the wind in the background.

"Watching Zeke stalk into the city. He's very good at what he does; its like looking for a shadow in a dark room." She replied.

"You knew he was leaving? Why not try to stop him?" I wondered aloud.

"Because he'd just go anyways. I know my Team, Vanguard; Zeke is like a hungry lion trapped in a cage with a mountain of steak in front of him. You can let him out and save him the suffering or you can watch as he claws and bites his way to freedomâ€¦or in this case, dinner." Answered the Spartan.

I grinned as I imagined Zeke as a skinny, starving lion. "So what's the plan for tomorrow?"

"Besides not getting killed?" She asked, causing me to grin wider.

"No shit." I remarked.

"Deseron's plan is to split the battalion into three attack groups and have each group charge into a weak point in the Covenant Frontline. Hopefully each group will shatter the weak points, which will get us into the city and disrupt Covenant formations across the line. Once we break through the line we'll head to a central

rendezvous point outside of the center of the city, codenamed Rally Point Actual. Once we're in Actual we'll reorganize into one, powerful force and rush into the center of the city; which serves as the Covenant ground HQ. If we control the center we can control the entire city, leaving only the flagship above as a threat." She replied.

"Simple enoughâ€|" I murmured.

"It's a pretty solid strategy, but if it fails then not only are we all dead but the UNSC will lose control of Haven and the entire Province completely." Warned Boss.

"No pressureâ€|"

"Vanguardâ€|Jackâ€|I don't know what will happen tomorrowâ€|" I heard Boss say, her voice filled with concern.

"Don't worry about it; we'll be fine. We're going to take Haven back and all of Spira, and we'll walk into that last pelican back to Earth." I said to her, meaning every word.

"How do you know that?" Boss asked after a few seconds of silence.

"Because no one else does."

14. II: Archangel

Chapter Eight: Archangel

(The Battle for Haven (**Semi-Finale**), Part Three)

July 5, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Haven, Spira.

"For Spira!" shouted a hundred UNSC soldiers as we charged towards the Covenant frontline, a barrage of plasma charges rushing back to halt our progress. We ran as a single unit towards the barricade-line half a kilometer ahead of us, our weapons raised and our eyes filled with determination. The buildings on both sides of us became blurry as we headed down the street, and my vision began to narrow as I focused on the blockade ahead. Soldiers sprinting close behind me began shouting battle cries and words of encouragement to their comrades as they spotted movement behind the Covenant Line.

No one knew what would happen next.

The air was filled with dozens of plasma shots and needler spikes, creating an almost overwhelming sense of panic as we tried to ignore them and continue forward. I heard a soldier gasp and fall to the ground behind me, a needler spike lodged in his neck. Another soldier to my left was hit in the chest with a plasma charge, the shot burning through his armor and revealing his ribcage.

A series of high pitch whistling sounds filled the air, sending jolts of panic through my mind.

"Covenant Mortars!" shouted a couple soldiers behind me, cursing as the ground around them exploded and sent towers of debris and fire

everywhere.

Dozens of mortars began to drop from the air and bombard our charge, sending soldiers flying into the sky and slamming them into the buildings nearby. Bloody limbs were detached and sent in all directions, their owners nearby.

The soldiers began to scramble around as they tried to evade the bombardment; those that were still alive continuing to charge forwards.

I lowered my head and shielded my helmet with my arm as a mortar struck a few yards to my right, splashing me with gravel and dirt. Another mortar fell onto a building nearby, creating a loud boom and collapsing the structure to the ground in a shower of glass, fire, and debris.

"Let's go!"

"Keep moving!"

"Come on!" I shouted as I turned around and ran back towards a soldier lying on his back, his left leg morphed into a messy, bloody paste.

"We gotta keep moving!" I yelled at him as I picked him up, realizing that his head was completely blown off. I cursed, dropping the body and turning back around.

A mortar slammed into the street a few feet away from me, filling my visor with white light as I began to feel weightless. I fell back onto the street a couple yards from where I had been hit, my vision blurry and my mind in a daze.

"Holy shit!"

"Help him up!"

"You're ok, sir!"

I began to blink rapidly as several arms lifted me back to my feet, and I glanced around to see Nicholai and Akiba.

I felt a breeze on my face, and quickly realized that my helmet had been blown off of my head. I spotted it a couple of yards away; the entire left side scorched and melted and the visor completely shattered. The white paint of the helmet was now charred black, and smoke began to rise from the inside of it.

"We need to keep moving!" Nicholai shouted as he handed me his MA5B. I gave him a nod, and we turned to continue our charge.

I spotted a soldier down ahead of me, screaming in agony as he gripped at a large shard of shrapnel sticking out of his leg. I ran passed the soldier, grabbing his chestplate as I began to drag him along behind me.

"Medic! MEDIC!" I yelled as I continued forward, the man groaning as he was dragged across the street. I looked to my right, watching as another soldier scrambled towards me; his head lowered as he tried to

evade the mortars.

"The Medics are all following at the rear of the charge; I'll take him to them!" the soldier said as he grabbed the injured soldier. I nodded, watching as he began to drag the wounded soldier back towards the rear.

A mortar dropped between the wounded soldier's feet and detonated, creating a large cloud of debris and blood. I shielded my head with my arms as I was sprayed with blood and gore, a charred arm landing at my feet.

Nicholai smacked my shoulder as he ran by; releasing me from the state of shock I had been in, "keep moving!"

The soldiers around us began to return fire at the Covenant, adding their bullets to the swarm of others that filled the air. I decided to save my ammo; I'd need it later.

"I want those grenades in the air the moment we make contact!" shouted Hercules as he ran up to my side, priming a grenade in his hands as we came a few yards away from the barricades that made up the Covenant line.

"Sir, yes sir!" replied the soldiers around us as they primed grenades, their anxiety building as we came within mere feet of reaching the line.

The remaining soldiers of Battle Group Zulu chanted battle cries around us as they stamped towards the line, sending the grunts and jackals behind the barricades fleeing in terror.

We were moving fast; we would make contact soon. The thunder of footsteps was all I could hear. I could see a grunt staring back at me from behind an energy shield, its eyes wide with dread.

We hit as one; over seventy soldiers clashed into the Covenant defensiveâ€|I don't know how to describe the collision; the impactâ€|noâ€|there's a word, but I can't recall itâ€|what is itâ€|wait, I remember. We hit like a freight train; it was like massive wave of strength slammed into a wall of glass; shattering it instantly.

We hit like a Tsunami.

With a shout I smashed my shoulder into the Portable Energy Shield in front of me, shattering it on impact and allowing the six soldiers behind me to open fire on the pack of Jackals behind it. Purple blood splashed into the air as the aliens were cut down, their misshapen bodies falling limply to the ground.

The aliens stationed behind the first branch of the frontline were quickly dispatched in a hail of bullets and melee attacks, allowing us to see the packs of Covie soldiers operating the heavy weapons behind them.

With a series of shouts the soldiers around me threw their grenades into the air; dotting the sky with the explosives. The grenades fell and bounced around on the ground, disappearing amongst the feet of the Covenant troops manning the Portable Mortar Cannons and Plasma

Turrets.

The grenades detonated in a series of thuds, creating a large wall of fire and destruction. Barricades, heavy weapons, and bodies were completely decimated; leaving only a cluster of smoldering craters in their wake.

The Covenant front line was formed of two rows of defenses. The first we had broken through mere minutes ago, and were able to compromise it and the heavy weapons stationed behind them. The second and main row of defense stood in front of us now; a row of energy shields and barricades, with pairs of plasma turrets set up between tiny gaps in the line. Over fifty Grunts sat behind the barricades, with Jackal snipers, skirmishers, and shield troopers behind them. Elite minors patrolled the line, plasma rifles and Carbines held in their hands. A few Elite Majors surveyed from the back of the line. Lastly, at least ten shades were stationed behind the infantry, ready to open fire and inflict heavy casualties on us.

In all over a hundred Covenant soldiers stood before us; tasked to hold their section of the miles-long Covenant Frontline like the thousands of other troops stretched across the city.

This would be difficult.

"Hold on to your panties boys, we're bustin through! Defensive positions! Rocket-jockeys up front!" barked Hercules as he dropped to a crouch, his voice almost lost below the whine of plasma fire around us. I dropped to a crouch as well, seeing a UNSC soldier die as he tried to charge the Covenant line alone; his body melted by a series of plasma charges.

The soldiers around us began to return fire as they crouched and hid behind cover; craters, downed street lights, rubble, buildings, anything they could find. The air was ablaze in plasma and streaks of piercing yellow lights as both sides let loose.

I looked back; spotting pairs of soldiers wielding M19 Rocket Launchers scramble their way towards the front of our assault. Some of them were cut down by plasma fire, but most managed to get into position.

"Fire!"

A volley of rockets screamed through the air and towards the Covenant line, gray smoke trails following them the whole way. Most of the rockets hit their targets and destroyed the energy shields and barricades, while the other either crashed down into the ground or banked skyward.

The Covenant troops began to panic, realizing that they were now exposed to our fire. The Elite Majors began to roar and bark orders, causing the troops under their command to shout and charge towards us.

A hundred Covenant soldiers came rushing toward us; their weapons ablaze and their mouths wide with battle cries. Grunts and jackals ran towards us, the purple shots of the shades behind them flying over their heads.

"Get ready!" Hercules shouted as he raised his shotgun and watched as the Covenant horde came closer and closer. The message was carried down our ranks as soldiers obeyed and prepared for the collision.

I steadied my breath and slapped a fresh mag into my rifle, using my free hand to wipe the sweat and grime from my face.

This was it. No more walls. No more shields. No more hiding.

I pulled the trigger and felt my rifle kick repeatedly, the barrel ablaze as 7.62 rounds left the weapon and cut through the armor of a Grunt five feet in front of me. The alien fell towards me and I quickly shoved it away, continuing to fire on a pack of Jackals behind it.

The Jackals that weren't killed by my barrage quickly dodged and rolled away, forcing me to switch targets. I turned to see a pair of Jackal skirmishers racing towards me, their jaws open as they shrieked at me. To my surprise the skirmishers were cut down; blood shooting from their skin as they fell to the ground lifeless.

I found a pack of Grunts a couple yards away trying to throw plasma grenades at a pair of UNSC soldiers hunkered down in a crater. The Grunts were killed before I could even turn my rifle, their primed grenades falling onto their bodies and detonating; sending their flaming bodies into the sky.

I shouted in surprise as a plasma charge impacted with the barricade beside me, a tiny drop of plasma splashing off the stone and melting a quarter-sized piece of skin on my neck. I clenched my teeth as the skin began to heat and sting immensely.

I turned towards the Grunt beside me that had fired the plasma shot, caving in its skull with the butt of my rifle. I quickly stood and opened fire at a second Grunt charging towards me, the bullets knocking it off its feet.

I scanned my surroundings for more targets, spotting a group of Grunts attempting to set up a plasma turret inside a large crater on the side of the street. I began to head towards the crater, killing the Covie troops around me as I went. A plasma grenade detonated nearby, spraying me with debris as I covered my head.

I passed a soldier lying on the ground, his legs missing and his armor encased in blood. He was still alive, I don't know how, and was still firing on the aliens around him.

"MEDIC!" I shouted as I passed the soldier, hoping that someone would find him soon.

I reached the crater, ducking as a group of UNSC soldiers on the street opened fire on the aliens in the crater. The Grunts had managed to set up the turret, and were now firing at the soldiers on the street; completely unaware that a white armored Spartan was standing behind them.

I pulled the trigger of my rifle, painting the walls of the crater blue with blood as the grunts were shredded to pieces.

I looked up, grinning at the soldiers on the street as they cheered

and waved at me.

I quickly left the crater and headed back into the street, looking for something else to do.

A Skirmisher appeared by my side and attempted to impale me in the side, forcing me to side-step to avoid the blow. A single bullet to the head silenced the alien; blood and brain matter ejecting from the side of its skull.

The sound of combat around me was almost overwhelming; it was as if the entire world was ablaze. Humans and aliens fought for their lives, their weapons never quieting as they struggled to kill as many as they could. The air was thick with stray bullets and charges, and the constant sound of explosions, gunfire, and screams never left my ears.

I ducked as a pack of Grunts nearby sent plasma charges towards me. I returned fire, dropping three of the aliens instantly. The rest dropped their weapons and began to flee, screaming for their lives as they flailed their arms frantically. I caught my breath, raising my rifle occasionally to fire at one of them and send its soul to oblivion.

One of the Grunts fleeing from me ran straight into an Elite Major, and was awarded with an energy sword through the eyes.

"Shit." I murmured to myself as I fired at the Elite walking towards me, energy swords in both hands. His shields were absorbing the burst of ammo, leaving him unharmed and me with an empty mag.

I growled, dropping my rifle and retrieving my combat knife and the Bowie Knife that Deseron had given me back in Rally Point Bravo. I wielded a knife in each hand, shaking involuntarily as I waited for the Elite Major to reach me.

The alien seemed to grin as it walked towards me, swinging its arms back and forth as if imagining my body being ripped to shreds.

"Let's dance." I said in reply, grinning.

With a roar the Elite charged, swinging the energy swords with elegance and grace. I evaded most of the alien's swipes, careful not to touch the blazing hot swords. I tried to counterattack between each maneuver, thrusting at the Elite's arms and chest to no avail.

The Major swung downwards towards my head, and I quickly raised my left arm to block his attack; my forearm slamming into his wrist and causing it to stop mid-swing. I used my free hand to jab at the alien's chest with the Bowie Knife, barely missing by an inch as the Elite backed away.

I rushed the Elite, swinging for its knees with both knives while ducking to avoid dual swipes towards my neck. The Bowie Knife connected with the Elite's right knee, creating a long slash under the armor. The alien slumped slightly and growled, before recovering and thrusting towards my heart.

Panicking I tried to block the jab with the Bowie Knife. The energy sword passed clean through the knife as if it were butter and broke it in two; forcing me to stumble down to my feet to avoid being impaled.

Cursing I dropped the useless Bowie Knife, standing to my feet and lowering into a defensive stance.

The Elite charged me again, roaring in defiance as it swung both swords horizontally at my head. I side stepped, ducked, and ran forward into the Elite's chest, burying my combat knife into its armor.

The Elite whimpered and staggered backwards, trying to muster the strength to raise either one of its swords and strike me down. With a grunt I pushed the knife further into its heart, hearing the Elite take its final breath.

The Major fell to its knees, dropping its energy swords before toppling to the ground.

I stood, breathing heavily as I withdrew the combat knife.

I quickly grabbed the energy swords, grinning as I felt their weight in my hands; the handles were surprisingly cold. I gazed at the bright brilliance of the blades, feeling the sheer power and energy emanating from them.

These would do just fine.

I charged back into the battle, cleaving a Grunt in half with one energy sword and slicing the arm off a Jackal with the other. The Jackal began to twitch rapidly, as if it was having a seizure, before being beheaded.

I rolled forward and stood in front of an Elite Minor, thrusting both swords into its chest and ripping its body in two.

I quickly turned to the Grunts under the Elites command and cut them down, the energy swords vaporizing their blood as I waved them through the air.

I followed a group of UNSC soldiers as they rushed into the remains of the Covenant line. The soldiers opened fire at the aliens still behind the barricades and shields, splashing their blood across the ground.

I impaled a blue armored Elite into the side of a stone barricade; my energy sword plunged into its gut and sticking into the cement barricade behind him. The Elite gurgled and stared at me with glassy eyes, the life already gone from its body.

A trio of Grunts nearby fired at me, and I rolled to the side to avoid being sprayed with plasma.

I reached the Grunts in seconds, slamming my right sword down on one's head and slicing it in two. The remaining Grunts dropped their weapons and fled, only managing to run a few feet before they were cut down too.

I turned in time to see an Elite Major charge towards me, an energy sword held in its left hand. The Major swung downward, his blow ineffective as I blocked with my right sword. Sparks flew through the air as our swords clashed, creating a brilliant flash of light.

I quickly side stepped and swung with my left sword, removing the Elite's sword-hand in a spray of blood.

The Major screamed in pain, backing away and gripping for its missing hand.

I slashed at its right leg, removing the limb and forcing the alien to fall.

A final swing to the neck silenced the beast; its head rolling away from its body.

I glanced around, noticing that the constant ring of gunfire had decreased dramatically.

The battle was over; UNSC soldiers were busy slaughtering the remaining Covenant soldiers and destroying their line, while others took pot shots at the enemies fleeing back into the city. The Covenant troops around me had all fled; whether it was from the knowledge that they had lost the line or the fear of a Spartan wrecking havoc with dual energy swords, I did not know.

Hercules came to my side, his armor scratched and dented and his shotgun held in his hands.

I turned to him quickly and raised my swords, thinking he was another enemy. He backed away slightly, holding up his hands in surrender.

"Whoa, whoa. It's just me." he said in surprise.

I let my hands drop to the side, embarrassed. "Sorry."

"Don't touch me with those things. I saw you prancing though the battlefield; slaughtering everything in your path with those things. It was bloody scary!" he replied, chuckling.

"Sir; the Covenant soldiers are retreating! They're abandoning the line! We've won!" a soldier shouted as he ran up to us, his voice filled with joy.

"Contact Deseron and the others and tell them that we've managed to secure this sector of the line. Rally the men and tell them to collect as much ammo as they can; we're moving out within the hour." Replied Hercules as he turned to the soldier.

"Yes sir!" and with that, the soldier ran off.

"Casualties?" Hercules asked as a Medic ran past us.

"Forty two dead and twenty wounded on our side, sir. It was a miracle that we were able to win this battle." Replied the Medic.

"And their losses?" Hercules asked.

"Uh, we don't know for sure. Maybe a hundred, hundred-fifty?" answered the Medic.

Hercules gave the Medic a nod, signaling him to continue on his way.

Hercules let out a sigh as he removed his helmet and took a seat on a pile of rubble, gazing forward into the depths of Haven. I took a seat beside him, watching silently as our snipers killed the last of the Covenant soldiers fleeing into the city.

It was gonna be one hell of a dayâ€!

* * *

><p>July 5, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Rally Point Actual, Haven.

"Vixen, Magma, and Zulu were able to successfully break through the Covenant Frontline and make their way into the city. We'll need a few hours to reorganize our men and prepare them for another attack before we can continue on our campaign through the city, however." Reported Boss.

"We don't have a few hours, Spartan. The Covenant will regroup and move their troops off the line and attack us here, meaning pretty soon we will be surrounded and crushed under their sheer numbers." Protested Malone.

"This campaign was doomed to fail from the beginning! So what if we managed to get most of our battalion through the Covenant line; that still leaves the rest of THEIR battalion to deal with! We lost over two hundred men in that first charge, and the Covenant still have thousands in reserve in the city. We should retreat and wait for reinforcements from the UNSC!" another Lieutenant chimed in.

"Reinforcements from where? If we retreat then we lose Haven; and if we lose Haven, then we lose this entire Province to the Covenant. No; retreat is not an option." Replied Brigadier General Deseron.

"We can finish this fight. We need to move fast; get the wounded to safety and resupply the soldiers. If we're lucky we can move on before the Covenant are able to mount a counter attack from behind us." Remarked Boss.

"She's right. We've come too far to back down now." Agreed Deseron.

"This is bullshit!" growled the lieutenant as he shook his head in disagreement.

"Noâ€|this is war." Replied Deseron.

* * *

><p>I left the War Tent, sighing as I rustled my hands through my sweaty hair.<p>

Rally Point Actual consisted of a dozen or so tents clustered in the

center of an intersection, with metal barricades creating a perimeter wall around it. Sentries, soldiers, and turrets were stretched across the barricaded, looking for any signs of Covenant activity nearby. Snipers were perched on the roofs of the buildings round the base as they watched from above.

The base wasn't designed to survive a Covenant attack; it was designed to give us a sort of temporary shelter while we restocked, resupplied, and prepared for our next push into the city. Hopefully we would be in and out of the base in a few hours, leaving it deserted before the Covenant had any clue we had been there.

Operation Archangel had been a success so far; we had managed to split our battalion into three attack groups and punch three small holes into the miles-long Covenant Frontline, and make our way into the city. We had regrouped here, Rally Point Actual, and were now reorganizing for our push into the center of the city as one, massive attack force.

"Vanguard!" I heard Gizmo shout as he walked up to me, rifle in hand. His armor was charred in several places, and the entire left side of his helmet was charred as well.

"Glad to see you still on your feet!" I grinned as I patted his shoulder.

"Bloody hell; what happened to your helmet?" shouted Gizmo in surprise.

I laughed, "I got hit with a mortar and lost it."

"A mortar, huh? I'm surprised you survived a direct hit from a mortar-actually no, I'm not. You're too reckless to be killed that easily." Replied Gizmo as he shook his head.

"You know me too well." I chuckled.

"So how did it go? Did you kill a lot of Covies?" Gizmo asked.

"Yeah I did. We lost some men, but it wasn't as bad as I had feared." I answered.

"I was put in charge of Vixen, alongside Malone and his men. Malone is one hell of a soldier; he had led us straight into the Covenant line and killed over fifty Covies single-handedly!" said Gizmo.

"Damn. I didn't know he was that good of a marine." I replied.

"Yeah. Oh, I almost forgot; I made this for you. I've been working on it ever since we got to Rally Point Bravo." Exclaimed Gizmo as he retrieved a black duffel bag from his side. He opened the bag and lifted a firearm out of it, placing it in my hands.

The weapon was clearly an assault rifle, but one I had never seen before. It had a long, cylindrical barrel, with a rail adapter system attached underneath. The frame of the rifle was strong but light, with a foregrip attached along the rails at the base of the barrel.

An adjustable butt stock was attached at the rear of the weapon, and a Red Dot Sight Optics Scope was equipped to a rail on the top of the gun. The firearm was painted coal black, and the initials "***MA6D***" were painted on the frame.

"Holy shitâ€|" I whistled as I handled the weapon, getting the feel of its weight and adjusting the stock.

"It's a prototype that I put together using scrapped weapon designs from Misriah Armories Archives. It fires 7.62 rounds like an MA5B, but uses a system of Nanomachines to help reinforce and increase the effectiveness of its gas-operated firing mechanisms, allowing the bullet to travel faster and with a lot more velocity and power when it leaves the barrel. This gives the gun a lot of kick, but the payoff is that the bullets travel so fast that they begin to overheat and glow a deep red, with the bullet's tip reaching over six hundred degrees! Bottom line is when someone gets hit with a bullet from this thing, it will literally burn clean through their shields, armor, and skin!" explained Gizmo as I examined the rifle.

"Sounds interestingâ€|" I mumbled as I slapped a magazine into the rifle and pointed it towards the sky.

I pulled the trigger, feeling the rifle kick furiously and hearing a loud crack echo throughout the base. The tip of the rifle caught fire before glowing red from the heat. I caught a glimpse of a small red streak bolting into the sky; the bullet.

"Damn, I could get used to this!" I shouted as I examined the weapon again, fascinated.

"Enjoy it." chuckled Gizmo as he patted me on the shoulder before heading off towards the War Tent.

I decided to head to the barricades and hunker down until we were ready to move on.

* * *

><p>"Covenant soldiers charging from the east!"</p>

"Contact on the west flank!"

"Shots fired on the south street!"

"Infantry spotted along the north street!"

"Damnit they have us surrounded!"

"We need more time!"

It had only been forty minutes since we had arrived in Rally Point Actual, and the Covenant had already managed to mount an effective counter attack.

"Watch your fields of fire! Focus on the Elites!" I shouted to the soldiers on the barricades around me, my voice echoing over the blasts of gunfire.

I pulled the trigger of my MA6D, killing a jackal standing behind a

street light with a burst to the head. Three more jackals were slain by my bullets, their bodies dropping like ragdolls.

A soldier to my right fired his rocket launcher, blasting a chunk out of a building and causing it to collapse on the twenty Covenant troops below it. The soldiers cheered at the sight, before focusing back on the battle.

At least a hundred Covenant infantry were advancing towards Actual on the street ahead of us, while hundreds of others were no doubt advancing from the other three streets as well. The advance was made of mostly Grunts, Jackals, and Elite Minors, but they were attacking the base from all sides; which was bad. We were surrounded and being forced to defend from all directions; meaning our defense would be spread thin and we had no way to retreat. Pretty soon we would be overrun, and the Covenant would siege the base and slaughter everyone inside.

"Jackal sharpshooters to our left!" shouted a soldier next to me as he turned towards the pack of jackals crouched in front of a building.

I turned towards them as well, pulling the trigger and sending one round straight through a jackal's eye. The soldiers around me finished off the rest, forcing me to pick a new target.

A pair of grunts carrying plasma grenades ran through the center of the street, catching my attention as I opened fire. The grunts dropped to the ground, their grenades detonating over their corpses and sending chunks of blood and flesh everywhere.

An Elite Minor and seven grunts around him tried to cross the street, hoping to flank our position. I killed the Elite with a single burst to the heart; the bullet passing through his shields and his armor.

Damn this rifle was powerful!

The bodies began to pile up on the streets, with more Covenant troops pouring in every minute.

So far the Covenant advance was a complete failure; they were just sending infantry blindly towards our barricades and getting their asses kicked. It didn't make sense; the Covenant were smarter than this.

A soldier to my right fell to the ground, a needler spike sticking out of his face. I found the jackal that was responsible for his death and opened fire, riddling its body with bullets.

"Ah! Belyi Rytsar! Here you are!" shouted Nicholai as he ran up to me, joining his fire with mine and helping me cut down a pack of grunts. Akiba came up to my right, giving me a slight nod as he joined the fight.

"How are the others holding up?" I asked the Russian as I searched for more targets.

"Your teammates are assisting the others defend the north, east, and south sides of the base. Deseron and Malone are hunkered down in the

center of Actual with the wounded, barking orders and sending reinforcements to help us hold the perimeter." Answered Nicholai as he shot at an Elite Minor.

"LOOK OUT!" I warned as I rolled away from the barricade. A massive ball of super-heated plasma smashed into the barricade inches away from where I had just been standing, destroying the wall, sending a wave of debris and fire into the air, causing a terrible ringing noise to engulf my ears, and creating a large crater in the ground. Nicholai and Akiba were thrown air-borne, crashing to the ground a few feet away.

"Covenant Wraiths!" I heard soldiers shout throughout the base. I stood and saw a trio of purple, Covenant Tanks stationed at the far end of the street, bombarding the base with plasma mortars. Fuck!

Apparently there were tanks appearing on all four streets around the base, raining plasma death on our ranks and barricades and forcing us to keep our heads down.

Suddenly a jackal skirmisher jumped over the barricades to my right, spotting me and charging instantly. The skirmishers head exploded in a shower of blood and brain; a smoke trail leading from its missing head all the way to the roof of a building half a kilometer away.

I surveyed the building where the sniper shot had come from, spotting Zeke waving from the roof. I grinned.

'Bout time he joined the fight!

"Belyi Rytsarâ€œ! I need to take him back!" shouted Nicholai as he limped towards me, blood covering his entire face. Akiba was slumped over his shoulder, unconscious.

"Go; I'll cover you!" I replied as I raised my MA6D, showering a group of Elites with cover fire.

Nicholai left my sight, heading back towards the Med Tent.

A plasma mortar soared above my head and arced downwards, slamming into a Tent and engulfing it in plasma and flames.

A trio of soldiers armed with rocket launchers ran up beside me, taking aim at one of the Wraiths in the street. Two of the soldiers fired, their rockets impacting with the front of the tank and causing it to stop.

The third soldier was hit by a burst of needler spikes, dropping his rocket launcher and he fell and died. I quickly grabbed the weapon and fired it at the tank.

The rocket smashed into the tank and detonated, creating a series of explosions through the Wraith and destroying it in a blaze of purple fire.

"Hold the line!" the soldiers around me shouted as they ran back to the barricades, trying their hardest to prevent the Covenant infantry from entering the base.

I returned to the barricades, crouching and emptying an entire clip into a horde of Covenant Grunts making a push towards our barricades.

I took a magazine from the body of a fallen soldier nearby, slapping it into my rifle and continuing my attack.

Apparently my efforts had attracted the attention of one of the Wraiths, awarding me with a volley of plasma mortars.

"HOLY SHIT!" I yelled as I hit the deck, the world around me seeming to explode as the mortars hit. Goddamn I'm like a mortar magnet!

I stood up, noticing the blackened craters and piles of bodies and rubble around me.

To my surprise Boss, Hercules, and Gizmo were at my side, firing at the Covenant infantry ahead.

I shook my head, trying to clear the terrible ringing from my ears. My entire body was numb, and my blood felt like ice running through my veins.

"Vanguard? Bloody hell...come here; take a seat. You need to sit for a while!" I heard Hercules say softly as he grabbed me and sat me down on a pile of rubble. What the fuck! What am I some fucking child now?

I looked down, a sharp surge of terror coursing through my spine as I noticed the long shards of shrapnel jutting out of my chest. My left arm was completely covered in scratches and scars, and my face was drenched in blood. My armor was making a low hissing sound as steam began to rise from the burns and cuts cluttering it.

I began to panic, fearing the worst.

I looked up at Boss and Gizmo, watching as they fired their weapons and evaded the thunder of plasma mortars around them.

I needed to get up! I needed to help!

Boss ran to me, using her body to cover my head as she activated her COMM.

"Actual West to Tundra-918 requesting strike package! Coordinates: Westbound quarter of a klick out from Rally Actual! Enemy Armor within the kill zone; bring the heavy rain!" she shouted as the Hercules and Gizmo ducked for cover.

A loud screeching sound echoes through the air as three streaks of black raced above us, dropping a swarm of black objects onto the street ahead. The bombs exploded and engulfed the entire street in fire and explosions, incinerating the Covenant soldiers in its way. The Wraiths were hit in the bombing raid, exploding and sending purple shrapnel everywhere.

"Holy shit! air support!" I mumbled as I watched three more Longsword raids scream past us, bombarding each street and destroying the Covenant attackers.

Hello Air Calvary, I missed you so much.

* * *

><p>"I thought air support was impossible in this province due to the Covenant Cruisers owning the skies?" I wondered aloud as a Medic pulled a rather large piece of shrapnel from my chest plate. I winced in pain as the shard left my skin, leaving a bleeding gash behind.</p>

"It is; or so we thought. The Covenant still owns the air; reinforcements and Evac are still impossible, but Longsword raids aren't. We found out from Deseron a few hours ago that we were finally able to contact High Command. Apparently the UNSC had found a way to slip Longsword patrols past the Covenant ships in the province. They've been able to assist UNSC soldiers trapped around the province with air raids every few hours. Tundra-918 has agreed to stay above the city for as long as it can, and provide us with tactical air bombardments. They're in no danger of being shot down by other ships, due to the ships in the area all being disabled by the EMP." Explained Boss.

"Okayâ€|" I nodded as the Medic yanked another shard out of my arm, "AH! MOTHERFUCKER THAT HURTS!"

Boss stood and patted me on the shoulder, "Hurry up and get yourself bandaged. We need you."

She left the Med Tent, leaving me alone with the Medic.

"Soâ€|you're probably wondering why there are needles and tubes connecting my muscles to my armorâ€|it's a long storyâ€|" I said to the Medic as I noticed her eyeing my armor fearfully.

"Well look who it is!" exclaimed Zeke as he entered the Med Tent, his Sniper Rifle slung over his shoulder. I grinned at the sight of him.

"The fuck happened to you?" he asked as he saw my wounds.

"I got hit by some plasma mortarsâ€|the fuck happened to YOU?" I rebounded. He had been missing since yesterday.

"I went hunting. One hundred and seventy three kills in all." Answered Zeke as he took a seat beside me.

"I seriously doubt you had a hundred and seventy three bulletsâ€|" I remarked as the Medic dug the last of the shrapnel out of my armor and stitched up my face. There was a large gash above my left eye and a similar cut over my nose.

"I didn't kill them all with my rifle." He replied as he withdrew a long knife and tossed it onto my lap. I picked up the knife, noticing that the blade was dull; dried blood covered the metal and there were scratches and dents everywhere.

"Wolves prefer silent kills." He stated.

"So are you gonna be able to kick some more Covie ass with us? Or are your injuries gonna prove too rough for you to handle?" Zeke asked,

his sentence stabbing into my pride like a knife.

"No; his injuries will just open up again if he even moves! He needs to rest and stay off of his feet for as long as possible! He won't be fighting for a long time." Reported the Medic as she stood, staring at Zeke. I could see a hint of fear in her eyes.

"Fuck that noise!" I snorted as I rose to my feet, activating the MVES system in my armor and bumping it up to 10 percent; just enough to numb the aching and the pain and let me still function on the battlefield. It would have to be activated constantly throughout the entire battle, but that was a small price to pay.

"Let's go."

* * *

><p>Over one thousand two hundred UNSC soldiers charged towards the center of Haven; a combination of two Nova Company Divisions supported by a team of Spartans and Longsword air support.</p>

Two thousand Covenant troops stood before us, protected by energy shields and barricades, with Wraiths, Plasma turrets, and Shades supporting them. An additional thousand Covenant infantry were close behind us, attempting to flank us and reinforce the Covenant battalion.

The center of the city was a large, circular intersection, with trees and grass in the middle and large skyscrapers surrounding it on all sides. The Covenant had set up excellent defensive lines of barricades, shields, and firepower.

The odds were stacked five-to-oneâ€|

And we still won that battle.

"FIGHT FOR TRUTH! FIGHT FOR HUMANITY! FIGHT FOR HONOR!" shouted Boss as she charged the Covenant battalion ahead, with the entire UNSC battalion close behind her.

We shouted and chanted our war cries; our voices echoing throughout the entire city. Our spirits were raised tenfold as we charged the enemy; no one felt fear.

We knew this was it. We knew this was our final push.

This was our moment. They would tell stories of our valiant siege of Haven.

Today we would brand our names into the pages of history.

I ran beside Zeke and Hercules, trying my hardest to catch up with Boss as she sprinted forward. The thunder of footsteps behind me was awe-inspiring; it was like listening to a stampede of Stallions race across the plains.

A streak of black passed overhead as Tundra-918 sent down a volley of bombs in a line, destroying the defenses in front of us and creating a towering wall of flames that stretched for at least a quarter of a mile. The bombardment created a breach in the Covenant line and hole

for us to enter through; although once we entered we would be attacked from all sides.

Honor Team charged through the hole first and opened fire on everything that moved, and seconds later the rest of Nova entered as well; rocket jockeys blowing new holes in the Covie defenses to allow the battalion move to maneuver.

The Shades, Plasma turrets, and Wraiths nearby all began to open fire, filling the air with deadly plasma. Dozens of our men were killed under the intense fire, while the rest managed to hunker down behind energy shields, craters, or barricades nearby.

I evaded behind an energy shield next to Zeke, while trading fire with the hordes of Covenant infantry around us.

Zeke had decided to swap his Sniper Rifle for an MA5B; his rifle strapped to his back.

We popped out of both sides of the energy shield, never letting go of the trigger as we fired on the enemies around us.

Boss and Hercules were busy providing cover fire for a group of soldiers nearby, who were attempting to take down a Shade turret.

Hercules had run off somewhere, no doubt raising hell with his shotgun and fists.

"Let's go!" spoke Zeke as he stood and began to make his way towards Boss, his rifle swaying back and forth as he killed the Covies around him.

I followed, cutting down a group of grunts that were pinning down a group of soldiers in a crater with plasma charges.

We reached the crater Boss and Gizmo were crouched in, rolling down next to them as we continued to fire at the enemy.

Both handed me a few mags and I slapped a fresh one into my MA6D, firing on an Elite Major ordering his grunt underlings to turn their plasma turret towards us.

My bullets blew the Elites head off, while Zeke and Gizmo slaughtered the grunts standing around the turret.

"Go go go!" shouted Boss as she waved the soldiers behind us forward. The soldiers obeyed and moved up, taking cover behind a line of barricades and shields a few yards ahead.

The Wraith's plasma mortars began to rain down on our positions, causing the UNSC soldiers and Covenant troops around to scramble around in panic to avoid being hit.

"Let's move!" shouted Boss as she leaped out of the crater, towards the next line of barricades.

We obeyed, covering her advance with cover fire.

Twenty UNSC soldiers crouched to our right, firing a volley of

rockets at the wraiths stationed in the center of the intersection. The rocket hit their targets, taking down three wraiths and the Covie infantry around them.

Soldiers assigned to disable Covenant Shades and Turrets were completing their jobs, allowing the rest of us to slowly push forward.

"Look out!" shouted Zeke as he pointed skyward. We hit the deck, and watched as Tundra-918 dropped another line of bombs over the line of Covenant troops in front of us. I covered my head as I felt the heat from the blasts, a pillar of flames rising into the sky.

"Move up!" commanded Boss as she stood and headed forward, with us close behind.

I crouched down behind a metal barricade and opened fire on a trio of Elites to my left, dropping them with the help of Zeke's fire.

I turned my rifle to the right, spotting a trio of Jackals as they gunned down a group of soldiers. I opened fire, filling the air with purple blood as the aliens fell.

"Get back!" shouted Zeke as he grabbed me and threw me backwards; just in time to avoid being incinerated by a plasma mortar. A charred crater replaced the barricade in front of me.

"Thanks." I said to my teammate.

"Malone! Deseron! Do it now!" shouted Boss into her COMM as we were pinned down by plasma mortars.

I heard the distant boom of grenades and explosions, and the battle cries of soldiers nearby.

Malone and Deseron had each been given one hundred soldiers and ordered to attack from the left and right flank of the enemy when given the signal. They had caught the Covenant completely off guard, and were able to punch giant holes in their defenses. We were now successfully attacking the Covenant from three sides!

"Hey Boss I brought you an early Christmas present! I found them stumbling through the streets looking for some action!" I heard Deseron shout through Bosses COMM.

I stood and looked around, my heart leaping as I spotted a dozen Scorpion Tanks wheeling towards us.

"HOOAH!" the soldiers around us shouted as they spotted the tanks, their spirits lifted.

The Scorpions opened fire, tearing apart the Covenant Wraiths with ballistic shells.

"FOR SPIRA!" shouted the soldiers as they charged forward, their rifles ablaze as they slaughtered the Covenant troops around them. They were on a rampage; the tiny spark of hope inside them morphing into a giant fire of determination and courage.

Hundreds of bodies littered the ground, blood covering the entire

intersection.

Honor Team joined the carnage, following our comrades and slaughtering the Covenant infantry in our way.

For twenty minutes we fought in the center of the city, our comrades by our side and our fingers never leaving the trigger.

The Scorpions opened fire again, creating holes in the gravel and sending the bodies of Covenant troops flying.

Tundra-918 screeched overhead again, dropping another wall of fire onto the battlefield.

We had basically won the battle, and were currently trying to finish off the opposition and gain control of the intersection. The Covenant troops were retreating back into the city, only a few making it away from the battlefield while the others were massacred.

The soldiers began to cheer in victory, their rifles swinging in the air.

We had done it.

We had won!

Suddenly a skyscraper ahead of us exploded in a shower of glass, metal, and plasma; the entire building crumpling down to the ground and creating a vibration in the ground and a shroud of dust to fog the air.

We immediately took cover, trying to figure out what this new threat was.

The dust cleared to reveal a massive purple machine looming over the battlefield; long purple legs stomping onto the ground and an enormous plasma turret mounted on its back. An eye was attached to its front, swaying back and forth as it surveyed the battlefield.

"SCARAB!" the soldiers began to shout as they took cover, watching as the behemoth prepared to fire on us.

The Scarab fired, its plasma blasts burning a large line through the intersection; vaporizing everything in its path.

The Scorpion tanks behind us opened fire, hitting the Scarab in its legs and causing it to stumble and lose its footing. A few seconds later the behemoth stood again, preparing to fire again.

"Come on!" shouted Boss as she grabbed me, sprinting towards the massive beast.

"ARE YOU FUCKING INSANE?" I yelled as we ran, look at her like she had lost her goddamn mind.

"Trust me." was her reply.

The Scarab opened fire again, hitting two of the Scorpion tanks and destroying them instantly. The rest fired again, clipping the machine

its legs again; this time breaking off chunks of its armor.

We continued to sprint towards the Scarab, sliding to a halt behind a barricade five yards away from its left leg.

The Scorpion tanks fired yet again at the Scarab's legs, causing explosions to erupt from the appendages and crippling the machine.

The Scarab dropped down to the ground with a thunderous thud, a loud alarm sounding from inside it.

"Let's go!" nodded Boss as she sprinted towards the Scarab, jumping onto a small ledge on the side of its body and racing up its side.

"She's gonna get me killed!" I mumbled as I ran after her, jumping onto the Scarab.

We headed up the side of the machine, rifles raised and our bodies on full alert.

Boss turned a corner and ducked as she spotted a pair of Elite Minors. She opened fire on the aliens, causing me to run up behind her and assist her.

The Elites flinched as they were shredded to pieces, their bodies toppling over the edge and falling down to the intersection below.

We continued on, killing a group of four grunts as they walked by.

We entered the main room of the Scarab, cursing as we noticed the ten Elites inside.

I fired a burst before taking cover behind a wall, while Boss sprinted to the wall across from me.

I popped out of cover and fired a burst at an Elite charging me with an energy sword, dropping him with a few bullets to the brain. I withdrew back into cover, glancing over at Boss and watching her pop out of cover to kill two more Elites with headshots.

I popped out again and laid down fire on a pair of Elites crouched at the back of the room, firing back with plasma rifles. Boss popped out of cover too, helping me cut down the two Elites before we both withdrew back into cover.

The remaining Elites in the room were gunned down, their corpses falling to the floor in a heap.

We continued to head for the control room, reaching our destination after a few minutes of fighting.

We were standing in front of a small hole in the center of the Scarab; millions of tiny, orange worm-like aliens squirming inside.

"That's gross!" I mumbled as I stared at the worms.

Boss took out a grenade, primed it, and jammed it into the horde of worms, allowing it to be lost from sight.

The grenade detonated, creating a chain of explosions throughout the ship and destroying the Scarab from within. We could hear the distant cheers and chants from the soldiers below as the Scarab was disabled.

Boss groaned and sank to the ground, causing me to race to her side, my face wide with concern.

"Boss?" I scanned her body, finding a trio of purple needles sticking out of her waist. They had sunken all the way into her body, with only a few inches being visible from the outside.

"SHIT!" I cursed as I held her, feeling her tremble in my hands.

"I'm okayâ€|" she grunted as she stood to her feet, grabbing her wounds. She sank to her knees, activating her COMM.

"Deseronâ€|prepare for a Covenant attack from behind our forcesâ€|there are stillâ€|infantry pursuing us from the Covenant Frontlinesâ€|" she mumbled between coughs.

"Yeah I got some more bad news too, sir. We were able to capture an Elite prisoner, and were surprised to find that he spoke English." I heard Deseron say from Bosses COMM.

"What did he say?" Boss asked, concerned.

"Besides threats on our lives and how we won't be able to join him on the Great Journey? Well, apparently their leader is still onboard that flagship above us." answered Deseron.

"The leader of their battalion?" she asked.

"No; the leader of the entire Covenant Fleet. Odin."

15. II: Asgard

Chapter Nine: Asgard

(The Battle for Haven (**Finale**), Part Four)

July 5, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Center of Haven, Spira.

"And you're sure the Covenant Fleet Commander is onboard that Flagship?" asked Boss as she grunted in pain, the last purple needle being pulled out of her waist by the medic.

"That's what the alien told us. Even if the Elite lied and the Covie leader isn't onboard, it's a Flagship; there has to be someone of importance to the Covenant inside." replied Deseron as he leaned against the door.

Deseron had decided to hunker down inside the buildings around the city square, setting up our temporary HQ in the lobby of a black

skyscraper. The soldiers were stationed around the square, setting up barricades and defensive perimeters; awaiting an attack by the Covenant troops arriving from the frontlines.

Our wounded had been sent into a building at the far left of the square, medical personnel having to use two stories in order to fit all of our injured. We had over a hundred wounded soldiers in all, with double that number KIA.

I had spotted Nicholai earlier in the building, carrying a box of bandages in both arms. He had told me that he had suffered some burns and scorching due to a plasma discharge splashing beside his head. Apparently Akiba was put in a room somewhere inside the building; suffering from third degree burns and cuts all over his chest, due to being near a plasma mortar as it landed. He would be okay, but it would take weeks for him to fully recover.

"Deseron's right, and we can't let an opportunity like this go to waste. I say we get up there and take the ship, and any VIPs onboard." I commented, watching as the medic shot a syringe full of Biofoam into Bosses waist.

"Send Honor Team up there and give us enough time to secure the ship. Once we've retrieved the package, we'll leave the ship in a dropship." Spoke Zeke as he balanced a pencil on his index finger.

"Wait, you mean a Phantom? No one can drive one of those!" stated Deseron in surprise.

"Gizmo can." Zeke replied.

"I can?" asked Gizmo, his head raised in surprise.

"Of course." Answered Zeke, no doubt grinning behind his helmet.

"Ok thenâ€|" murmured Gizmo.

"See? Everything checks out. It's a pretty simple plan." Concluded Zeke.

"But risky." Reminded Deseron, shaking his head.

"What do we have to lose?" asked Zeke instantly.

"Five Spartan Soldiersâ€|" answered Deseron as he glared at Zeke.

"Pfft; fuck that noise! You hearin this guy, Vanguard? He thinks Honor's not capable of completing a simple fucking 'retrieve a VIP' mission!" protested Zeke as he stood and walked towards me.

"You'll be surprised at what Honor can do on our own, Deseron." I told the Brigadier General.

"I didn't mean any disrespect, Spartan." Deseron said to Zeke.

"You and me, Vanguard; we're gonna fly up to that Flagship, raise some hell, kill some Covies, and bring that leader kicking and screaming back down to this prick!" said Zeke as he put his hand on

my shoulder.

"Then what are we waiting for?" I asked, grinning.

"Now that's what I'm fucking talkin about! Let's do this shit!" shouted Zeke as he grabbed his rifle and left the room, clearly anxious and excited.

I remained in the room, glancing at Boss and Deseron.

Boss sighed, standing and picking up her rifle as well. "Go tell Hercules that we're heading out. If Zeke goes, then all of Honor goes with him. We're not splitting up anymore."

"Sir, yes sir." Nodded Gizmo as he stood and left the room.

"Are you sure you don't wanna sit this one out? That injury looks like it might slow you down, Bossâ€œ!" I said to her, eyeing the holes in her armor.

Of course, I shouldn't even be the one bringing up injuries. I still had bits of shrapnel stuck in my chest and arm, and aching like a motherfucker. If it weren't for the constant flow of Nanomachines giving my muscles the strength to carry on, I would've dropped a while ago.

"I'll be fine, Honor-Three. I'll be in command of Honor while we infiltrate the Flagship. We'll retrieve the VIP and be out of the ship within thirty minutes." Said Boss as she turned to Deseron.

"And I'll be here; preparing our troops for the next Covenant attack." Nodded Deseron.

"Are you sure you can hold the square till we get back?" asked Boss, concerned.

"We have Tundra-918 and Maverick's company of Scorpions still with us; I think we'll be fine." Replied Deseron.

"Keep me posted." Said Boss as she headed for the door, gripping her side with her hand. "Van, let's go."

* * *

><p>"You don't really expect me to wear this piece of shit, do you?" I asked Gizmo as he handed me a standard UNSC combat helmet; a brown, armored hat fitted with a green, rectangular visor covering the wearer's right eye.</p>

"I've modified the COMMS system inside the helmet to link up with Honor Teams Squad-COMM channel. It's the only way you'll be able to communicate with all of us on the battlefield since you lost your own helmet." Replied Gizmo.

"I didn't lose it! It got blown off of my fucking skull!" I complained, grabbing the shit helmet and examining it.

"Deal with it for now, Van." Replied Gizmo as he walked off towards the others.

I eyed the helmet, growling. "Fuck this."

I reached inside the helmet and pulled out the entire COMM system; a small earplug connected to a mic, a tiny metal box, and some wires. I fitted the earplug into my ear and wrapped the wires around my earlobe, keeping the device in place.

I used my finger to operate the small box attached to the COMM, activating the device and switching over to Honor's Squad-COMM.

I walked over to join the others, taking a seat on a stone barricade beside Zeke.

"So how are we gonna get up to it?" Hercules asked, staring at the massive Flagship floating above us.

"No clue. The Covenant still own the skies, so using a ship to reach it is out of the question." Replied Boss.

"Then this mission is fucked before it could even get off the ground." I growled, pissed.

We grew silent, our hearts filled with anger as we stared at the purple vessel a mile above us.

"I have an idea; it's batshit insane, but it might workâ€|" said Zeke. We all turned our heads towards the black armored Spartan, completely surprised.

"Let's hear it."

* * *

><p>"The prisoner is through here." Said the UNSC soldier as Zeke and I entered the brig; a building located at the back right corner of the square that had been converted into a holding cell for the Covenant POW.</p>

The soldier pointed at a metal door beside him, a window built into the top of it, allowing us to see the Elite prisoner inside.

"So, how are we going to do this?" asked Zeke as we came up to the door, peering at the Elite inside.

The Elite Minor inside was seated on a small metal chair, its hands secured behind the back of the chair by strong, metal cuffs. The Elite had been stripped of its armor and helmet, its black reptilian skin covered in bruises and blood. It had its head lowered, mumbling something to itself.

"Good cop, Bad cop?" I asked Zeke.

"I call bad cop." He answered quickly.

"Son of a bitch!" I cursed in frustration, grabbing the handle of the door. "I hate being the good copâ€|"

I swung open the door and stepped into the metal room, closing the door behind me. I stood in front of the Sangheili, smiling. The Alien

cocked its head to the side as it examined me, confused.

"Demon? I never knew your kind looked soâ€¢human." Spoke the Elite, his voice full of pride, nobility, and honor.

"Well we are still human under all the armor and augmentations; and we have names. I'm Vanguard; a Scout and Reconnaissance Unit assigned to Spartan Honor Team." I replied, watching the Elite's reactions carefully.

The Elite leaned back in his chair, staring at the single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. "Honor?"

"Do you know the word?" I asked. I had no idea how fluent the Elite was in English.

"It is a different word in my native language, but it still holds the same meaning. I am a warrior of great 'Honor.'" Replied the Elite proudly.

"Then we are more alike than you think." I commented.

The Elite turned its head towards me, surprised.

"So do you have a name?" I asked the Elite, pacing around the room.

A few seconds of silence.

"I am known by my kin as Drassil 'Mes Ventinee." Answered the Elite, prideful.

"That's quite an honorable nameâ€¢" I commented in respect.

"Indeed, human." Nodded the Elite.

"So, here's the situation, Drassil; our races may be at war, but that doesn't mean and you have to be." I began, taking a knee in front of the elite and looking at him at eye-level.

"I'm listening." Said the Sangheili, interested.

"It's true that we don't know each other, and we're not supposed to, according to your leader. But what we do know is that we are both men of intelligence and honor, meaning we can come up with a solution to this problem both rationally and without violence. Do you get what I'm saying?" I continued.

"I do, Demon." Was the reply.

"My superiors have told me that they wish to negotiate with the Covenant leader onboard the Flagship above us." I stated.

"The Asgard." Corrected the Elite.

"My apologizes. But, you see, the problem is that we are currently fighting over possession of the city, and we fear that your leader may think that we are setting up a trap for him. What we need is for you to contact the Asgard and request an escort for us up to the ship, and accompany us to a negotiations meeting with your superior.

If we succeed then maybe we can form a truce or peace treaty of some kind and we can all go home; no one else needs to die in this war." I lied.

The Elite remained silent, contemplating whether to aid us or not. I watched him, hoping that he would take the bait.

"I admire your kindness and hospitality, 'Spartan,' but I cannot agree to your plan. Peace between our races is not possible until you leave this planet and turn it over to us, as well as the holy relic floating above it. The Asgard is the jewel of our fleet and the vessel of those that have seen the Great Journey; your kind would only taint its holiness with your presence. My leader is an honored warrior far greater than I; he will not stop his campaign on this planet until we have achieved victory and been swept into the Journey." Replied the Elite.

Fuck.

I sighed, standing and heading back towards the door. "I understand your reasoning for not wanting to aid in peace between our races, and I will not force you to help us. You're a respectable warrior, Drassil; I'm glad we were able to meet here with words, rather than on the battlefield with weapons."

"Likewise, Spartan."

I opened the door and left the room, closing it behind me and leaving the Elite alone in the room.

"You're up." I said as I patted Zeke's shoulder.

"With pleasure." He replied, no doubt grinning under his helmet.

Zeke opened the door and entered the room, slamming it behind him.

"Oh, uh, hey!" I barked as I turned to the UNSC soldier guarding the door. "Can you go get me a coffee? Make it thirty percent actual coffee, and seventy percent sugar."

The soldier saluted and ran out of the building.

Now that's service.

I whistled as I turned to look through the window in the door, watching Zeke grab Drassil by his neck and punch him in the eye; saliva and blood being launched out of the Elite's mouth.

I could hear Zeke shouting in the room, but couldn't make out exactly what the words were through the metal door.

After five more minutes of Zeke brutally beating the Elite the soldier came back, carrying a steaming cup of caffeinated coffee.

"Fuck yeah!" I exclaimed as I took the coffee, taking a sip and enjoying the delicious taste.

Mmmâ€|sugarâ€|

"I'll be back you scumbag alien cock-sucking grunt-fucking human-killing son of a BITCH!" shouted Zeke as he opened the door, slamming it shut behind him.

"So I take it that went really well?" I asked Zeke, taking another sip of coffee.

"He's not talkin. It's your turn again." sighed Zeke as he leaned against the wall.

I nodded to him, walking towards the door and drinking the coffee, the steam tickling my nose.

"HEY! Where the hell did you get that?" asked Zeke as he spotted the coffee, confused.

"He went and got it for me." I replied, pointing towards the soldier beside the door.

"And you didn't think to get me one too, you ignorant twat? Get your arse off the damn wall and get me a FUCKING LATTE YOU PRICK!" shouted Zeke, slamming his fist into the wall and denting it. Man, he was really getting into characterâ€|

The soldier jumped up in terror and fear and raced out of the room. I could've sworn he both pissed his pants AND shit himself. Lovely.

I opened the door and closed it behind me.

"Holy shit!" I shouted in shock as I saw the Elite; bloodied, bruised, and panting.

I kneeled down in front of the Elite, "Drassil are you okay? I only left for a minute to get something to drink; bloody hell what did they do to you?"

"Demonâ€|tried to get me to help himâ€|contact the _Asgard_â€|I refusedâ€|" coughed Drassil, his breaths coming in short gasps.

"Here, I'm going to unlock your cuffs so you can have a little more space to breath. I'm trusting you to not try and attack me when I uncuff your hands, Drassil. I'm just trying to help youâ€|" I told him as I set my coffee on the ground, grabbing the cuff keys from my side.

"I will notâ€|harm youâ€|you have my wordâ€|" wheezed Drassil.

I nodded and moved to his back, inserting the key into the metal cuffs and unlocking them. The cuffs fell to the ground with a clang and the Elite stood, lifting his head to the ceiling and taking in large gulps of air.

I watched as Drassil caught his breath and stretched his limbs, trying his hardest to recover from Zeke's beating.

"See, I showed you kindness and trust so now you should repay the favor. You are bound to by honor." I told the Elite, using his code

of honor against him.

"You speak the truth, Spartan; but I cannot help you. Assisting you would put the life of my Warlord and the sanctity of the Great Journey at risk." Replied Drassil as he turned to me.

The Elite was huge, easily a head taller than me and muscular.

"You spilled my coffeeâ€|" I told him, glancing down at the overturned cup and the precious liquid spilled on the floor.

I walked over to the cup and picked it up, "I'm going to get some more coffee. You want any?"

"No."

"Suit yourself." I opened the door and closed it behind me.

I spotted Zeke leaning on the wall, his hands empty. The soldier was still gone.

I gave him a nod, watching as he stormed into the room and kicked Drassil in the chest, sending the Elite crashing into the wall behind him.

"It doesn't have to be like thisâ€|" I said to myself in disappointment, setting the empty cup on a table nearby.

Zeke left the room five minutes later, snatching the fresh latte from the hands of the soldier nearby. "Bout fuckin time!"

I chuckled and headed back into the interrogation room, spotting Drassil lying in a corner of the room. One of his mandibles had been broken and hung to the side, and two of his fingers were broken as well.

"It doesn't have to be this way, Drassil. The pain can all stop in an instant. Help us achieve peace and we'll let you go; free to leave and see your home world and loved ones again." I said, making him an offer he couldn't refuse.

Drassil looked up at me, his gaze meeting mine and giving away his answer instantly.

He had cracked.

* * *

><p>Boss, Hercules, Zeke, Gizmo, and I sat crouched in the ruins of a collapsed building, our weapons raised and aimed towards the intersection ahead of us.</p>

Drassil stood in the intersection alone, wearing his blue armor and helmet. He kept glancing towards our hiding spot and then towards the sky; waiting.

After a few minutes the hum of an engine begin to rise over the wind, and I looked up to see a Phantom Dropship appear in the distance; making its way towards the intersection and Drassil.

The Covenant had taken the bait.

"Remember; don't kill the Elite. I gave him my word." I reminded my teammates, staring directly at Zeke.

Zeke noticed me staring, "if he's in my line of fire then I'm sinking a bullet into his brain."

"Zeke!" I growled.

"Ughâ€¢ fineâ€¢" sighed Zeke, defeated. He didn't want to start an argument; especially over a Covenant soldier.

"Look alive, Spartans!" ordered Boss, causing us to focus again.

The phantom descended into the intersection, kicking up wind and debris as it hovered over the ground in front of Drassil. The side doors of the Phantom opened, revealing ten grunts and five jackals inside.

"Engage!" ordered Boss, pulling the trigger of her MA5B and sending a barrage of bullets at the phantom.

We obeyed and opened fire as well, our rifles kicking furiously as we slaughtered the Covenant troops in the dropship.

The grunts and jackals were massacred almost instantly, their bodies jerking and flailing wildly as the storm of bullets cut them to ribbons; blood coloring the ship's interior.

It was over in an instant.

I stood and walked towards the intersection, spotting Drassil crouched on the ground with his hands covering his head. I grabbed him by the back and lifted him to his feet, turning him towards me.

"You have one minute to flee. If you're not out of our sights within sixty seconds, then our sniper will blow a hole the size of a tangerine into your brain." I said, my voice emotionless.

Drassil turned and ran, disappearing from our vision within thirty seconds.

"You did say you could fly this thing, right Gizmo?" Zeke asked as he hopped into the dropship, taking a seat on a small bench built into the wall.

Gizmo jumped into the phantom's "cockpit," looking over the controls. "Not at all; but sometimes you have to run, before you crawl."

* * *

><p>"Bloody hell, Gizmo! Keep us straight!" I shouted as the phantom banked wildly to the left, causing me to struggle to stay afloat.</p>

"HEY! You wanna come up here and drive this piece of fuck yourself? It's like steering a goddamn rock!" I heard him shout through the COMM.

I mumbled and sat back on the bench beside Hercules.

"If you want I could catch you if you end up falling out of the dropship." Suggested Hercules as he turned his head towards me.

I glanced down at Hercules's huge, armored hands, then back up to his visor. "That's okay."

"Suit yourself." Chuckled Hercules.

"So Boss, what's the plan?" asked Zeke, who sat on the bench on the opposite side of the ship. His Sniper Rifle was cradled in his hands, and six .50 Cal Magazines were taped to his chest.

Boss had come up with the idea of using duct tape to stick extra mags of ammo to our armor. Six mags of 7.62 rounds were taped to my chest too, and the others had taped on extra ammo for their respective weapons as well. It was actually quite brilliant, and would definitely come in handy in the long firefights ahead.

"We'll be arriving in the hangar bay, so once we leave the dropship be ready for a fight. Gizmo will use his Data Pad to find a way to hack into the Asgard's Mainframe, and create a path for us to follow all the way to the bridge. While Van and I go to eliminate the Covenant Warlord, the rest of you will head to the Reactor Chamber and the Engine Room. Gizmo and Hercules will use tactical C-4 to blow the reactor and the engines, which should cause a chain reaction that will destroy the ship in a matter of minutes. After completing your objective the three of you will head back to the hangar and into the dropship, and wait there for Van and me to return." Explained Boss.

"Understood." Nodded Zeke.

"Sounds simple enough." I commented.

"Finally! I get to hack shit!" cheered Gizmo.

"We're gonna blow up an entire Covenant Flagship? Sound's fun." Spoke Hercules.

"If the Elite was telling the truth and the Covenant Warlord himself is on board this Flagship then killing him here and now will end this war before it can get any worse. We can't fuck this up, Honor; failure is NOT an option." Reminded Boss, her tone firm.

I leaned back on the bench, sighing. "No pressure."

* * *

><p>The phantom ascended above the roofs of the buildings and continued towards the massive belly of the Asgard. The city loomed below us, and the dozens of UNSC and Covenant Frigates floating around the city seemed to watch in silence as we climbed into the air.<p>

We reached the belly of the massive Flagship, its white, metallic underbelly casting a large shadow on the small Dropship.

The Asgard was enormous, easily a kilometer in width and three kilometers in length. Its dark purple hull shined in the sunlight, and the metallic underbelly seemed to reflect light back down into the city below. A massive circular platform was built into the center of the ship's belly, a warm heat emanating from inside it.

The ship was slanted downwards in the air, an indicator that the EMP was still disabling its primary functions and allowing the ship to move.

"There." Boss pointed at an opening in the side of the ship; the hangar bay.

Gizmo managed to fly the phantom into the hangar bay, setting us down on a small platform as instructed by jackal technicians.

The hangar was a huge room, filled with phantoms, seraphs, and Banshees. Thirty grunt workers walked around the room, and ten jackal technicians supervised their work. An Elite Major was leaning against a door leading further into the ship, his plasma rifle gripped loosely in his hands as he slept.

Grunts and Jackals nearby began to walk towards our phantom, preparing to inspect the ship and escort the "Peace Negotiators" inside.

"Engage!" shouted Boss, prompting Gizmo to open the cargo doors and let us out of the ship.

We leaped out of the phantom and crouched onto the floor, opening fire on the aliens around us. The Covenant Technicians were dropped in seconds, blood shooting from holes in their bodies.

I moved into cover behind a crate as the Elite sleeping on the wall awoke, barking orders to the troops inside after realizing what was going on. The Covenant soldiers in the hangar organized quickly, showering our positions with plasma fire.

I popped out of cover and squeezed the trigger of my MA6D, blowing the head off of a jackal standing next to the Elite in command. The Elite instantly realized that I was targeting him and ducked into cover, preventing me from getting a clear shot.

Zeke was laying behind a banshee to my left, his rifle propped up on a bipod as he focused on his shots. He pulled the trigger, the entire rifle shifting backwards in his arms as it launched the .50 Caliber bullet out of the barrel. A crate a few yards ahead of Zeke shattered in a flash of debris and metal, and the jackal crouched behind it exploded into several chunks of meat and blood. Zeke grabbed the bolt of his rifle and snapped it back, lifting another bullet into the chamber.

I moved to the end of the crate and popped out of the left side, sending a burst of bullets into the torso and neck of a grunt running across the room. I moved my rifle a few inches to the right, gunning down a pair of grunts before they could run back into cover.

Gizmo was busy laying down cover fire as Hercules rushed forwards, occasionally pumping his shotgun and sending a shell shattering into the chest of a jackal. The red armored Spartan quickly rolled behind

the nearest crate, allowing Gizmo to cut down a trio of grunts charging at him with plasma pistols.

Boss slowly began to advance towards the Elite, vaulting over crates and rolling under banshees as she returned fire at the Covenant soldiers around her. I watched her as she went, squeezing my rifle and stopping a duo of jackals as they tried to flank her advance.

I followed Boss as she made her way through the room, constantly firing my rifle and killing enemies taking advantage of her blind spots.

When she came up behind a phantom a yard away from the Elite's cover, the alien quickly stood and fired with its plasma rifle; showering the ship with plasma shots and causing Boss to take cover.

The Elite turned towards me and fired as well, forcing me to duck behind a crate to avoid being hit. I was still missing a helmet to integrate with my armor, meaning my shields weren't active and protecting me.

One lucky shot and I was a dead man.

I lifted my rifle and placed it on top of the crate, firing blindly at the Elite and forcing it into cover.

"Go!" I shouted to Boss, giving her a short window of opportunity.

She took it, standing and sprinting towards the Elites crate.

I popped out of cover and watched her go, firing at the Covie soldiers nearby; killing most and sending the rest into cover.

I watched Boss reach the front of the crate and lean over it, emptying an entire mag into the Elite on the other side. Blood began to seep from under the crate, creating large puddle on the floor.

"All clear." Reported Hercules as he walked up to us, shotgun resting on his shoulder; Gizmo close behind him.

I glanced around the room, realizing that the hangar was littered with corpses.

"That was one hell of a warm up." Commented Zeke as he reached me, sitting on the crate.

"Gizmo, see if you can hack into the Mainframe from here." Ordered Boss as she pointed at a small control pad built into the wall beside the door.

"With pleasure." Replied Gizmo as he plugged a blue wire into the control pad, connecting the Data Pad built into his arm with the control pad.

We stood in silence as Gizmo tapped the keys on the Data Pad.

"Done. The ship has a pretty complex security system, but I was able to gain control over the doors. The alarm and Communications systems

are still active so, so we'll need to move fast before every Covie in the entire ship is breathing down our necks." Nodded Gizmo as he unplugged the blue wire.

"Excellent work, Honor-Five." Replied Boss as she the door ahead of us unlocked and slid open, revealing an empty hallway beyond with two doors leading in opposite directions.

"I unlocked a series of doors leading in a straight line through the ship and into the bridge, starting with the door to the left. It's the quickest route possible but it will also take you through the heart of the ship; meaning you'll be up against a lot of resistance." Reported Gizmo.

"We'll be fine. Contact me when you've completed your objectives and we'll rendezvous back here in less than twenty minutes." Said Boss as she turned towards the door to the left, rifle raised.

"Understood." Replied Gizmo.

"Good luck. Let's go, Vanguard." Ordered Boss as she headed towards the door.

I followed close behind her, looking back to see Gizmo, Hercules, and Zeke dash through the opposite door; taking their own route which would eventually lead them into the engine room and the reactor chamber.

We walked through the door and into the almost identical hallway ahead, hearing it slide closed behind us.

"Another hallway that looks the exact same as the one before itâ€¢lovely." I commented as we sprinted through the room, towards an unlocked door at the end of the hall.

"Stay focused."

"Sorry."

The door slid open as we neared, revealing a large room acting as a kind of intersection; connecting the four hallways that led north, south, east, and west. Rows of metal pillars rose from the floor to the ceiling, and the large, metal statue of an armored Elite stood in the center of the room.

Ten grunts sat in the room, their five Elite commanders talking to each other in their native tongue.

"AH! Demons!" screamed a grunt as it saw us enter the room, jumping up and running around in circles.

In a matter of seconds the room was alit with plasma fire.

I rolled to side, stopping behind a nearby pillar as plasma charges charred the floor around me. Boss had done the exact same thing, clutching her side as she leaned against the pillar across from mine. Her wounds must have been affecting her alreadyâ€¢

I popped my entire body out of cover, aiming with my rifle and firing a burst into the skull of an Elite Minor charging at my pillar. I

adjusted my aim towards the grunts around his corpse, gunning them down as well.

I returned to cover and let the empty mag fall out of my rifle, ripping another off of my chest and slapping it into the firearm.

A grunt rounded my pillar and bumped into me, apparently not knowing I was still there. I crushed its skull with the butt of my rifle, sending its corpse dropping to the floor.

I glanced over to see Boss pop out of cover and empty her mag into a pack of grunts advancing towards her pillar, hitting their Elite commander as well and causing its shields to flare.

I helped her and fired on the Elite as well, causing a spurt of blood to shoot from its neck. The Elite struggled to breath as it dropped to the ground; suffocating within minutes.

Three Elites were left in the room, all behind cover and trading potshots with us.

I grabbed a plasma grenade from the body of the grunt below me and primed it. I popped out of cover and threw the grenade as hard as I could, sending the orb across the room at over ninety miles per hour. An Elite sticking its head out from behind a pillar was smacked in the face by the grenade, being knocked off its feet as the grenade stuck to his head.

The plasma grenade detonated, creating an aura of intense heat and plasma; killing the Elite and the other two around him. The pillars managed to stay standing, their surfaces charred and blackened along with the floor.

"Wellâ€|that wasâ€|convenient." Commented Boss as she left her pillar and headed towards the next door, with me close behind.

* * *

><p>We continued through the route, brawling through room after room as we attempted to reach the bridge. Dozens of Covenant soldiers tried to stop us but ultimately failed; their bodies sprawled in a pool of blood on the floor.</p>

Boss began to tire and weakened the further we went, her wounds getting the better of her. She tried to not to show it, but the signs were getting more noticeable with each firefight.

The door slid open with a hiss, revealing the large room ahead.

The room was dome shaped, with a series of doors scattered around the walls. The room was completely empty, except for the metal, circular platform built into the center of the room.

"Oh shitâ€|" I mumbled, staring at the two behemoths standing in the center of the platform.

The two behemoths were huge; easily eleven feet tall and weighing over ten tons. They wore massive sets of dark blue armor, with powerful Fuel Rod Cannons melded onto their right hands. Metal shields were held in their left hands, and long, blue spikes jutted

from their backs.

Hunters.

"Look out!" I shouted to Boss as the Hunters fired with their fuel rod cannons, sending blasts of green energy towards us.

I rolled to the side, the green blasts engulfing the floor where I had stood a few moments ago; heating the air and scorching the floor.

I crouched and pulled the trigger of the MA6D, firing an entire mag into one of the hunters. The 7.62 rounds deflecting harmlessly off of the hunter's armor.

"Shit!" I cursed as I rolled away again, another wave of energy passing behind me.

A hunter dropped into a run and charged at Boss, who was busy firing her rifle and trying to stop the hunter to no avail.

The brute reached her in seconds, slamming its metal shield down into the floor as Boss rolled to avoid being crushed. The hunter quickly lifted its shield and swiped it at Boss, bashing her in the side and sending her hurling into a wall.

"No!" I shouted as I ran towards the hunter.

I slammed my fist into the hunter's waist, grunting in surprise as my hand slid into the orange mass of worms that formed the beast.

The hunter turned and tried to crush my head with its shield, forcing me to duck quickly as I struggled to free my arm.

"Fuck this!" I growled as I used my free hand to put my rifle on my back; retrieving a frag grenade from my leg and jamming it into the mass of worms between the hunter's armor.

With a shout I removed my hand from the hunter's flesh with a sick splashing sound; the force of my pull knocking me to my feet.

The grenade exploded, engulfing the hunter in a tower of fire, worms, and blood. I covered my eyes, shouting in pain as the thud of the explosion sent waves of pain through my ears.

The worms that had formed the brute fell down to the floor in a puddle of gore and armor pieces.

One down, one more to go.

I turned towards the other hunter, my heart skipping a beat as I noticed it charging towards me; enraged by the death of its comrade.

Panicking I dove to the ground and picked up the dead hunter's Fuel Rod Cannon, slipping my hand through the frame and struggling to get the thing to work.

"Come on come on come onâ€¢FUCK!" I cursed, frustrated.

The hunter reached me, bringing up its shield and preparing to smash my face to bloody goo.

The Fuel Rod Cannon lit up and fired, sending a blast of green energy through the chest of the hunter ahead of me; creating a large hole in its torso. The hunter dropped down to the ground, the worms inside it flailing around frantically as they died.

I dropped the cannon and dashed over to where Boss lay, kneeling in front of her. "Selene? Selene!"

"I'm okâ€|" she coughed as she struggled to stand, crying out in pain as she clutched her side.

I grabbed her arms, helping her to her feet. I stared into her visor, noticing that she was breathing heavy.

"Your wounds are opening up again, you need medical help." I told her, examining the wounds on her side.

"I told you I'm fine, Jack. We still have a mission to complete. I'll make it." she answered quickly, pushing me away from her as she headed for the next door on our route.

"Seleneâ€|pleaseâ€|" I started, watching her go.

"Let's go, Vanguard. That's an order." She barked at me.

"Yes sir." I replied, running to catch up to her.

We passed through the door and headed into an empty hallway, ending with a staircase leading up into the Bridge.

Boss shuffled along beside me, and I noticed her limping slightly.

We heard a series of distant thuds coming from behind us, and struggled to stay afoot as the floor began to shake violently.

"That must be the C-4." I remarked, turning to Boss.

"Yeah. Let's hurry up and get this done." Replied Boss as she quickened her pace.

We rushed up the staircase and towards the large door ahead; decorated with gold trimming and a dark blue glow. A control pad was built into the wall beside the door, its light green, indicating that it was unlocked.

"Stack up." Ordered Boss.

I quickly stood in front of her and let the tip of my rifle touch the door, broadening my shoulders and tightening my grip on my firearm. Boss placed her left hand on my right shoulder and interlocked her legs with mine, holding her MA5B in her right hand; the barrel of her rifle parallel with mine.

I calmed my breathing and reached out with my left hand, hovering it over the control pad.

Two taps on my right shoulder.

I pressed my hand against the pad and the door slid open in response, allowing me to rush into the room and immediately scan for targets.

The bridge was huge; a large oval room with Covenant machinery aligned along the walls. An elegant floating chair stood on a raised platform in the center of the room, facing the massive window that revealed the sky outside.

It looked like the room was emptyâ€¦ were we too late?

A large, golden gauntlet appeared from beside me and grabbed me by the neck, throwing me into the air and across the room with inhuman strength. I grunted in pain as I slammed into the small set of stairs leading up to the Shipmaster's chair.

I looked back at the door, watching as a huge, gold armored Elite punched Boss in the face and kneed her in the side, causing her to scream in pain.

The Elite picked her up and threw her as well, knocking her onto the floor a few feet away from me.

"I've been waiting for the chance to meet with you face-to-face, Demon. I've heard many things about your kind." Spoke the Elite, his voice filled with power as he stood before us.

He was the embodiment of a true Elite warrior. Eight feet tall. Easily two hundred pounds of pre muscle. Elegant, golden armor unlike any I've ever seen before. A golden helmet that covered his entire face; a single, "V" shaped slit to see out of. The aura of nobility and honor around him.

A true Elite.

I rose to one knee, raising my rifle at the Elite's head.

The Elite reached me in milliseconds, grabbing the frame of my rifle and slamming his elbow into my face.

I shouted in pain as I was hurled to the ground again, a large cut appearing over my left eye.

"My apologizes, I just realized I haven't introduced myself. I am Odin, ruler of the Covenant Empire and leader of its armies. I am their Arbiter; a warrior chosen by his people to resurrect our fallen kingdom and lead them bravely into the Great Journey and salvation. I am their sovereign; I am their God." Spoke Odin, taking a graceful bow.

"I don't remember asking you your name, split-lip!" I growled at the Warlord.

He chuckled, "your species never did learn the power respect and honor can bring. Even in the face of death, you choose ignorance over humbleness."

"You invade our land, kill our families, and burn our homes; and

expect respect from us? Fuck you, pal." I said as I spat at the Elite.

"This world is not your home, human; it is the Divines. We are merely sheep, searching the fields of the galaxy trying to find our Sheppard; our salvation. There are clues here that the Divines have left for us; holy relics and constructs that your human hands will taint and corrupt. And so we must take them, and kill every last human in our way." Replied Odin, glancing down at Boss as she lay at his feet.

Odin reached down and grabbed Boss by the neck, rising and holding her up in the air in front of him. "The Great Journey awaits all who are loyal to the Gods, all othersâ€|are doomed to fade into oblivion."

Odin brandished an Energy Sword with his free hand and activated it; the long, white blade melting the air around it. With the slightest of movements the Elite plunged the sword into Boss's chest; the sword cutting through her heart and sticking out of her back. Boss lifted her head to the ceiling as she gasped, the burning sword snuffing the life out of her body.

"NOOOO!" I shouted with every breath in my lungs as I watched Selene's body grow limp; her head lowering to face the ground.

The Elite let Selene's body fall to the ground, where it remained motionless.

I stared at the body, unflinching. Unmoving. Unbelieving. There was no way.

Selene wasn't deadâ€|that was impossible.

"I see potential in you, demon; and now I've given you a reason to chase me. Run after me, human; follow me to the ends of the universe and into the great beyond, we'll mark our place in history as the two who warred till the end of times." Spoke Odin as he deactivated his sword, placing it back at his side.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" I roared as I stood, activating the MVES System in my armor and pushing it up to sixty percent.

An extreme rush of adrenaline, energy, and power; it almost overwhelmed me. I screamed in rage as the limitless abundance of power coursed through my blood, sparks of electricity visibly sprinting across my armor. Steam began to rise from the vents in my armor; even rising from out of my mouth.

Rage and hatred were my fuel, and I let them run freely through me. I felt limitless. Unstoppable. Invincible.

A reaper. A fallen angel. A demon. A titan.

A God.

I bolted towards the Elite, my legs a blur as I reached him in nanoseconds.

I threw a powerful punch at the Elite's face, my eyes widening in

surprise as the Sangheili caught it in his palm. Static began to course through his hand as he continued to hold my fist in place.

With unbelievable speed Odin slammed his fist into my face, knocking my head backwards. I snapped it back, head-butting the Elite in the chest and sending him back a few feet.

I was upon him again, my punch again blocked by his forearm. I launched a kick at his exposed side, realizing too late that the hole in his guard was a trap. The Elite grabbed my leg in mid-kick and smashed his fist into my face again, using my leg to throw me across the room.

I crashed into the Shipmaster's chair and shattered it on impact, dizziness clouding my head.

I cried out in pain as Odin stomped his foot onto my chest, breaking a rib. I struggled to breathe under the pressure of his foot, trying my hardest to stay conscious.

"Even at your strongest; you are weak." Stated the Elite Warlord.

The ship began to rock violently, and more thuds could be heard in the distance.

Fiery explosions erupted in the bridge as the ship began to tear itself apart.

"It was fun meeting you, but it looks like it's time for me to be going." Frowned Odin as the quakes and explosions continued to rock the ship.

"Here." Said Odin as he retrieved his energy sword and dropped it beside me, "you better learn how to wield it properly. I'm looking forward to sparring with you sometime."

Odin removed his foot from my chest and began to walk away, leaving me wheezing for air and powerless to stop him.

"Until next time, Demon." And with that he left the bridge.

I coughed up blood and caught my breath, crawling along the floor to the body of Selene; tears in my eyes.

"No no no no no you're not deadâ€|" I said, as if my words would resurrect her.

I struggled to my feet, grabbing her arm and lifting her up. "Come onâ€|we need to goâ€|"

I carried her body with me as I walked towards the door leading out of the bridge, trying my hardest to ignore the fact that Selene's feet were being dragged under her.

A massive explosion blew through the door and sent us airborne, flying across the room and crashing through the window as the entire bridge was encased in searing fire.

We fell through the open air, down towards the city of Haven below. I could see the _Asgard_ being engulfed in explosions and flames above us, large pieces of it breaking off and falling as debris.

Selene was falling a few inches out of my reach, and I struggled to grab her to no avail.

I need to grab herâ€|I need to catch herâ€|if I don't she'll fallâ€|if I don't she'll dieâ€|

My back slammed into a solid object below me, breaking my fall. I cried out in pain from the impact, my bones aching.

I looked down, realizing that I had landed on the roof of a phantom.

Selene hit the roof of the phantom as well, stopping for a moment before she began to slowly slide off the edge.

Panicking I crawled towards her body, my heart racing as I struggled to reach her in time. She reached the edge of the ship and fell off.

"NO!" I shouted as I leaped to the edge, grabbing her arm with my left hand.

I screamed in pain and terror as my shoulder snapped under from her weight; her armor alone weighing over eight hundred pounds. I lost feeling in my arm as I began to hear the bones break one by one.

Suddenly Boss's weight faded from my arm and I looked down, seeing a red armored Spartan grab her body and pull it into the phantom.

A black armored hand reached up and grabbed me as well, pulling me down into the phantom.

"Vanguard? What the fuck happened?"

"Shit! She's not breathing!"

"She's been stabbed through the chestâ€|it looks severe!"

"Gizmo get us down to the others! She needs help!"

I looked up at Zeke and Hercules as they crowded her body, lying her down on the floor of the ship. They unhooked her helmet and threw it aside, revealing her face.

Long, elegant black hair. Beautiful, piercing green eyes staring forward into the gates of heaven. A tender face. Pale skin. Luscious lips.

I let my head lower back down to the floor; closing my eyes and feeling the pain of sadness and guilt strangle my heart. Memories began to flow back into my mind; memories I will forever cherish.

I heard someone walk towards me, taking a seat beside me.

"What happened?" Zeke's voice, emotionless.

I let the tears flow from my eyes, allowing myself to weep as I thought of an answer to the question.

"She's gone."

H:V

16. II: The Rookie

Chapter Ten: The Rookie

John-117

Date (Unknown: ANOMALY) / Location (Unknown: ANOMALY)

"Chief!"

I rolled to the left to avoid the blast of acid being launched at me, the rancid chemical splashing into the dirt and melting it with a screeching hiss; smoke rising from the scorched crater.

I dropped to one knee and raised my rifle at the monster's face, squeezing the trigger and hearing a loud click.

"Shit!" I shouted as I rolled under a swipe from the monster's massive claw, trying to find another magazine to slam into the MA5B.

"GRAAAURGH!" roared the beast as it shot its head towards me, jaws wide and a shower of green acid flying through the air. I rolled to the left again, but was immediately struck in the chest by the monster's spiked tail as it whipped through the air.

This thing was a fast learner.

I was hurled through the air and sent crashing into a nearby bark tree, the wood snapping and denting under my weight.

I stood and shook the grogginess out of my head, chills racing up my spine as I watched the huge Wyvern charge towards me; jaws snapping and wings flapping wildly as it caused the trees in its way to fall to the ground.

"There's nothing we can do to stop that thing! Chief, run!" the AI in my head shouted in worry.

I decided to obey Cortana and took off in a sprint; the massive Wyvern close behind as I ran through a thick forest.

The green leaves and brown bodies of the trees seemed to blur around me as I pushed through the forest, the roars of the beast and the stomping of its claws close behind.

"Chief, look out!" shouted the AI.

I turned my head back towards the Wyvern, my eyes widening as I noticed the large tree flying through the air towards me.

I dropped into a slide, lowering my head as the body of the tree careened over me, crashing to the ground a few yards ahead.

I rolled out of the slide and rose to a sprint again, the Wyvern screaming in frustration behind me.

I began to zigzag around trees as I struggled to run faster, trying my hardest to lose the giant beast. It slammed through the trees and melting others with acid, its eyes still focused on the Spartan ahead.

I ran into a small clearing; the trees creating a circular perimeter around a field of grass and bushes.

I rushed through the clearing, trampling the luscious grass below my boots. The Wyvern entered the clearing a few seconds after me, exhaling a large stream of acid across the field. The chemical burned away at the grass and bushes with a loud sizzling sound, transforming the field into a scorched patch of dirt.

The Wyvern let out a startled roar and I turned my head around to figure out why, watching as the beast tripped over a small tree trunk and fall to the ground with a deafening thud; shaking the ground in its clumsiness.

I took the opportunity and dove behind a clump of bushes at the far edge of the clearing, lying flat on the ground and hoping my green armor would blend in with my surroundings.

The Wyvern shook its head and stood again, its eyes scanning in all directions as it tried to find me again. I lied perfectly still, holding my breath as I waited.

After a few minutes of stomping around the clearing and spewing clouds of acid onto random trees the Wyvern let out a roar of defeat, spreading its enormous bat-like wings and sending surges of wind smacking into the trees nearby.

With a mighty roar the monster leaped into the air and began to flap its wings, lifting itself above the treetops before soaring off into the distance.

I stayed hidden for another ten minutes, making sure that the creature had truly left the area.

"Motion Sensors aren't detecting any hostiles within a fifty meter radiusâ€œI think it's gone." said Cortana as I stood, scanning the sky above. The luminous yellow orb of light floating in the center of the World shone down on me, causing circles of light to reflect off my visor and hamper my vision.

"What was that thing?" I asked the AI.

"I was able to perform a quick scan of the organism when you came into contact with its tail. It had no blood flow or heart rate, and its core body temperature was zero degrees." Reported Cortana.

"Another walking, breathing corpse?"

"Seems like it. it shared the same genetic anomalies as the 'Lurkers' we encountered earlier."

"So there could be more?"

"Possibly. We're either dealing with some new form of reanimation similar to the Flood, or a whole new species of organisms entirely."

"We'll worry about what they are later; right now, staying alive and finding a way out of here is all that matters." I replied, checking my motion sensor for any hostiles.

"Agreed. Head south through the forest, Chief; back towards the cliff-face where we saw the crashed frigate. with any luck we can find ammo and supplies inside, or even a COMMs System we can use to contact the UNSC." Advised the AI.

"Understood."

* * *

><p>I moved through the forest slow and quiet, my back lowered as I hid behind trees and ducked into bushes to remain undetected. I would spot the occasional Lurker wandering through the forest, their gray heads swaying from side to side as they grunted and groaned.</p>

The huge, yellow orb floating in the sky continued to illuminate the Core World, its bright light never wavering or fading. There was no night here; no sunrise, no sunset. The light was constant.

One long, eternal day.

* * *

><p>The massive frigate had crashed at 40 degree angle with the dirt ground and the brown rocks of the cliffs in front of it. The frigate had collided with the ground with such speed and velocity that the entire bridge and front of the ship had created a half-a-kilometer long skid mark in the dirt, which ended with the remains of the ship's hull being wedged between the cliffs and a large crater in the ground. Rubble and debris were scattered everywhere, some pieces of metal still smoking and burning from the crash. The hull and back of the ship were surprisingly still intact, though large chunks of the walls had been torn off and smoke still climbed from the depths of the darkened ruins.</p>

I could barely make out the words "Thunderous Cry" painted in white on the rear, left engine of the massive ship.

"All power within the vessel has been lost, and from the looks of it the engines were damaged beyond repair." Reported the AI.

"Can you detect any survivors inside?" I asked Cortana.

"No. Well, at least not from outside of the ship." came her reply.

"All the more reason to head in and explore." I stated as I walked

towards the frigate.

I jumped over the small slope of dirt and slid down into the crevice the ship had made when it crashed; making my way towards the Hangar Bay which would normally be located in the back of the ship. I waded my way through piles and piles of rubble, metal creaking and screeching as I moved it aside.

"The temperature inside the ship is in the high nineties; there's a possibility of open flames and flash fires still burning inside. Be careful, Chief." Advised Cortana as I reached the large opening leading into the hangar bay.

"I always am."

The Hangar Bay was dark; broken crates and vehicles were scattered across the bay and wires hung from the ceiling; sparks randomly shooting out of them and illuminating the room for a split second for it was again engulfed by darkness.

I activated the small flashlights built into my helmet, the two rays of white light allowing me to see a few meters in front of me. I made my way through the Hangar, hearing my boots clank noisily against the metal floor.

An intact warthog was flipped on its side on the left wall, its windshield cracked in several places. I flipped the vehicle and tried the ignition, my eyes widening in surprise as I heard the engine roar to life. I killed the engine and moved the warthog to the front of the Hangar. The warthog would be extremely useful.

I passed the body of a UNSC marine, his chest impaled with a large piece of metal. I kneeled over the corpse and searched his body, finding three magazines for my MA5B and a loaded M6D Magnum. After strapping the pistol to my leg and storing the ammo on my belt I stood, and continued to walk through the Hangar.

I came upon a large weapons crate lying on its back in the middle of the floor. I grabbed the edges and pulled it up, setting it upright and staring at the lone weapon on the rack.

The firearm was roughly the same size as a BR55, with a heavy, black metal frame covering the firing mechanisms inside. A hand-guard rail was placed on top of the rifle, and an adjustable stock was crafted into the rear. The barrel of the rifle was constructed of a small cylindrical tube, and the magazine feed was located on the stock, behind the trigger. A 203 Grenade Launcher was attached to the bottom of the frame, a tactical light was hooked to the right side, and a laser sight was hooked onto the left. A serial number, name, and manufacturer were crafted into the side of the frame:

Fusil d'Assaut de la Manufacture d'Armes de Saint-Etienne

FAMAS G7

Saint-Etienne, Obsidian Corps.

I grabbed the assault rifle and felt its weight in my hands, retrieving the six mags of 5.56 rounds stacked in the weapons crate.

I wedged a fresh magazine into the weapon and clicked off the safety, lifting the sights to my visor and getting use to the feel of the rifle.

"The FAMAS: a french bullpup rifle first developed in 1967 by Saint-Etienne, a weapons manufacturing company located on Earth. In 2142 the company was merged with Obsidian Corps, a company best known for its role in War Economics. The FAMAS G7 Variant was produced in 2557 and was primarily used by UNSC Strike Teams trained in closed-quarters firefights. The rifle has a high rate of fire and a strong jam-proof Lever-delayed blowback firing mechanism, and each magazine holds thirty 5.56 rounds. The rifle was primarily used for close range, with accuracy decreasing dramatically with distance." Stated the Ai as she analyzed the weapon.

"I've never used one of these before!"

"The FAMAS G7 was designed to be able to tear bodies apart with close-range bursts, and it will no doubt come in handy if we encounter anymore lurkers."

I nodded and kept the rifle, putting the magazines on the back of my belt as I continued through the hangar bay.

"I've uploaded a tactical map of the frigate onto your HUD, using information and records of standard UNSC Frigate-Class Warships in my database." Said Cortana as I reached an intact, closed door leading further into the ship.

"Thanks." I replied as I looked at the map; a 3D blueprint displaying the layout of the frigates levels and rooms. I placed a digital NAV point over the room labeled "**Storage**." Hopefully I could find some food rations, water, and other supplies there.

I opened the metal door and entered a pitch black hallway, having to turn on the tactical light on the FAMAS in order to see farther.

A group of six lurkers were huddled together in the center of the hallway, their combined gasps and snarls creating a chilling orchestra.

Without hesitation I squeezed the trigger of the FAMAS, feeling the rifle kick furiously as it launched 5.56 rounds rapidly and filled the hallway with a deafening roar.

The lurkers jerked and twitches as their bodies were torn apart, their limbs ripping off their torsos and flying everywhere in a storm of blood and flesh.

I ceased fire and the hallway grew silent; a mass of gore, rotting flesh, and blood sitting in the center of the hall.

I grabbed the magazine and pulled it out of the firearm, glancing inside it and realizing that I had only fired half of the bullets in the mag. Impressive.

I slapped the magazine back into the FAMAS and made my way to the other end of the hallway and through a door that was already ajar.

I entered a large room with doors built into the walls, all leading

into different sections of the ship; with the one a few yards ahead of me leading in a path towards the bridge. The floor had collapsed halfway through the room, forming a big crevice leading down into the lower level. Rubble had collected in mountainous piles on the other side of the room, blocking most of the doors.

I decided to use the crevice to head down into the lower levels, and make my way below to the Storage Room from below.

I jumped down into the crevice, my boots creating a loud thud sound as I landed on the metal floor below.

Three lurkers turned towards me and shrieked, running forward as they attempted to maul me.

I quickly sidestepped one as it leaped towards me, and slammed the butt of the FAMAS into its shoulder blades; hearing a satisfying crack as its spine was split in two. The lurker fell to the floor behind me.

I raised the FAMAS and fired on the remaining two sprinting at me, barely spotting their bodies in the darkness. The rifle roared and illuminated the room, sending two bursts of fire into the creature's heads; shredding their skulls to pieces.

I turned back to the lurker struggling to stand behind me, its neck lifted and bent awkwardly and the bulge of its spine poking out of its skin.

A single bullet to the brain ended the monster's suffering.

I let the empty magazine fall to the floor and retrieved another, hearing it smack into the rifle as I pushed it into the magazine feed.

I continued on, walking through the doorway leading into another hallway; the door missing entirely.

A single lurker was banging its head against the door at the end of the hallway, a 5.56 round to the back of the head ending its existence and sending its body sinking down to the floor.

The door led into a small maintenance room, with disabled computers and machines resting in debris and ruins around the room.

I found a frag grenade on a corpse sprawled across the monitor of a computer, blood dripping onto the floor from the countless wounds on the body.

The maintenance room led into a hallway that split into several routes.

I took the left hall and followed it, dispatching a lurker that had been busy devouring the corpse of a dead technician.

The hallway led down a flight of stairs and into another hall, with metal signs on the walls telling me that I was heading towards the Cryo Bay.

I began to notice dozens of lurker corpses cluttering the floor, with

their numbers increasing the closer I got to the Cryo Bay.

Suddenly the sound of automatic fire rang through the hall and I crouched, trying to pinpoint the direction the sounds were coming from. The gunfire stopped and I began to rush down the hall, desperate to find the source of the fire.

I rounded a corner and cursed in surprise, quickly stepping back and taking cover behind the corner wall.

Around the corner was a small hallway, with a large metal door standing at the end, leading into the Cryo Bay. The door was closed and locked, but the large, rectangular window built into it was missing its glass. A small, circular, metal tube was sticking out of the broken window, smoke rising from its tips.

The barrel of a MA5B assault rifle.

Twenty lurkers were standing in front of the metal door, trying their hardest to break into the Cryo Bay beyond. They crowded the hallway and struggled to move, grunting and snarling as they attempted to all reach the door. They were standing and stepping over the corpses of lurkers below them, bullet holes scattered across their bodies.

The shooter behind the door fired again, sending two lurkers falling to the floor.

I turned the corner and lifted the FAMAS to my waist, squeezing the trigger as I hip fired at the pack of creatures. I kept my finger pressed against the trigger, cutting the monsters down with bullets; their bodies separating and falling to the floor in a pile of arms, legs, torsos, heads, eyes, and brains.

The shooter must have been startled by my sudden appearance and fired at me, forcing me to roll back behind the corner wall to avoid being hit.

"Hold your fire!" I shouted as the shooter continued to hold down the trigger, denting the wall beside me with bullets.

The shooter stopped firing and I slowly turned the corner, noticing that the barrel of his rifle was no longer sticking out of the door-window.

"Bloody hell! A Spartan?" I heard a male voice shout from inside the Cryo Bay.

"I'm a friendly." I said, trying to reassure the shooter.

After a few seconds of rustling the metal door swung open, revealing a shocked UNSC soldier standing inside the Cryo Bay; his eyes gazing at my armor and his mouth agape.

The soldier was young, maybe twenty, with short brown hair, blue eyes, and tanned skin. He wore a blue set of standard UNSC armor, with his dog tags hanging over his chestplate and a blue bandanna tied over his forehead. His MA5B was gripped tightly in his hands, and a DMR was slung over his back.

"Man am I glad to see you; I was beginning to think that I was the

only one left in this hellhole. I was hoping someone else would come along and save me, but I never thought it would be a Spartan!" exclaimed the soldier, a smile forming on his face.

"Sorry to crush your spirits, but I'm with any kind of rescue group. I'm stranded here as well." I replied.

"Really? Damn. I knew getting out of here sounded too good to be trueâ€œ the soldier sighed, frowning.

"How did you get here? What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know. First, a cute technician comes into my room and tells me that we'll be landing on Spira in a few hours, so I decided to take a nap. When I woke up, sirens were blaring and people were running around screaming and panicking. I looked out the window and saw that we were falling out of the damn sky and towards the cliffs. I panicked too; took my rifle and crawled under my bed and hoped for a miracle. I guess we crashed after that; I can't really remember, I must've been knocked unconscious or something. When I came too, I'm the only one aliveâ€œ then, a few hours later, thoseâ€œ things started to crowd around the ship; I guess they were investigating the crash or something. I panicked again when they started to search inside the ship; ended up emptying fourteen mags of ammo into them as I ran away. I ended up down here and ran into the Cryo Bay; locking myself inside while those savages banged on the door. I've been trapped in here ever sinceâ€œ who knows how many hours had pastâ€œ" answered the soldier, his face covered in disbelief.

"His vitals are all normal, Chief; I can't find any trace of Flood infection or of the genetic coding found in the lurkers. He's clean." I heard Cortana say through my helmet.

"I'm Fisher, by the way. Private First Class McGee Fisher, previously assigned to the 143rd UNSC Expeditionary Force, Nova Company, Alpha Division." Said the soldier as he gave a clumsy salute, his rifle falling to the floor.

"Sierra-117." I replied, nodding for him to end his salute.

"Sierra-117? You're Master Chief; the legendary war hero and savior of humanity?" asked Fisher, excitement in his voice.

"I'm no savior."

"Holy shit! It is you! Oh man, I never would have believed in all my life that I'd be able to meet the fearsome Master Chief! You're the superhero I grew up hearing stories about as a kid!"

I remained silent, ignoring his compliments. Not out of modesty, but out of guilt.

I turned around and began to head back towards the Hangar. The hall to my right leading further into the building was blocked off by a wall of rubble, meaning there was no way for me to reach the Storage Room or even travel any deeper into the frigate.

"Hey! Hey, where ya goin? Don't leave me here!" Fisher shouted as he ran to keep up with me, his rifle carried loosely in his hands. He

was green; a definite rookie. "Are you going to try and find a way out of this place? Take me with you, I can help!"

"You'll only slow me down."

"I won't! You'll need me; I can help you, I know I can!"

I stopped, jostling the thought of letting the Private accompany me around in my head.

"Another rifle in combat is always handyâ€|and maybe we could even use him as Wyvern Bait." Suggested Cortana.

I turned back to Fisher, glaring down at him through my visor. "How much can you carry?"

17. II: Waypoint

Chapter Eleven: Waypoint

Date (Unknown: ANOMALY) / Location (Unknown: ANOMALY)

"Are you sure it's there?"

"Yes sir, I'm positive! When the _Thunderous Cry_ was dropping out of the sky, I spotted a large, pillar-like structure on one of the mountaintops to the east. Bloody hell, the _Cry_ almost crashed into the damn thing!" answered Fisher as he leaned against the Warthog's LAAG.

"If he's right, then that construct could be our only ticket out of here; maybe there's a teleportation system or control room inside it like we had found back on Halo. It's worth checking out, chief." Suggested Cortana.

"It's as good a lead as anyâ€|" shrugged Fisher.

I set my FAMAS and MA5B down into the passenger seat and jumped behind the wheel, grinning as I turned on the ignition and heard the vehicle roar to life. I looked ahead, gazing at the lush plains and forest beyond the warthog's windshield.

"Can you navigate and man the LAAG at the same time?" I asked the Private, glancing back at him.

"Hell yes, sir! Don't worry, we won't get lost!" he replied as he gave me a thumbs-up.

"If we do then you're going to have to find another Spartan to follow." I warned as I slammed my foot into the gas pedal.

The warthog surged forward at an alarming speed, rushing through the hangar bay and causing the wind to scrape against my visor.

"Relax, will ya chief?" I heard the AI say as the warthog flew out of the frigate, remaining airborne for a few milliseconds before smacking into the ground with a loud thud.

"Shit!" cursed Fisher in surprise as he was lifted into an

involuntary hop behind the LAAG, struggling to keep his balance.

"It's been a long time since I've driven one of these."

* * *

><p>The warthog barreled out of the dirt crater and cruised through the plains of grass, heading eastward; towards the vast forest beyond.</p>

I swung the steering wheel from side to side as the warthog zigzagged through the trees, occasionally rushing past a lone Lurker walking through the forest and causing it to fall over from the momentum of the vehicle. I tried my hardest to avoid hitting the creatures; no need to damage a perfectly nice warthog.

We passed over a small creek running through the forest, the warthog careening over the edge and leaping through the air before touching back down on the other side of the creek.

We drove out of the forest thirty minutes after entering it on the opposite side, passing through a field of tall grass stretching for miles across. The blades of grass seemed to shy away from the tires as we passed by, the wind bending their blades in the opposite direction.

"There it is! On that summit!" I heard Fisher shout over the roar of the warthog and the wind. I looked towards the eastern horizon, spotting the chain of mountains that stretched across the landscape. Atop one of the black silhouettes rose a pillar, its tip jagged.

I turned the warthog towards the mountain and pressed on, taking note as the grass below began to morph into clear water.

Soon we were driving through a shallow swamp; large weeds and stalks of grass jutting out of the clear water.

"Looks like we got some company!" shouted Fisher as he clicked off the safety on the LAAG and pulled back the bolt.

I spotted a Wyvern fifty meters ahead swoop down towards us from above, its jaws wide as it let out a shriek. I pressed harder on the pedal and felt the warthog pick up speed; the wind howling against the metal of the vehicle as we raced towards the behemoth.

Fisher squeezed the trigger on the LAAG and opened fire, causing the tip of the machine gun to glow red hot as it sent a swarm of yellow bullet streaks at the Wyvern. Surprisingly the beast did its best to avoid being hit; swaying from side to side and attempting barrel-rolls to evade the incoming fire. Most of the bullets still sunk into its skin, however, digging themselves deep in its gray body and creating tiny holes in its chest.

The Wyvern flashed its jaws and opened its mouth wider as we came within a few meters of colliding with the beast; its wings spread wide and legs clawing at the ground as it prepared to slam into us and halt our charge.

I quickly slammed my foot on the brake and spun the steering wheel

around counter clockwise.

The tires screamed loudly as they locked up, causing the warthog to enter a fierce drift and kick up a wave of water around the tires. The tail of the vehicle whipped around and slammed into the head of the Wyvern, the sheer force of the blow knocking the monster a yard away and sending it crashing into the swamp water.

I quickly turned the wheel clockwise and slammed my foot into the gas again, causing the engine to roar and the tires to kick up even more water as the vehicle spun back around and surged forward again at top speed.

"Holy shit! You wanna at least fucking warn me before you pull some crazy shit like that again? I almost got eaten for fucks sake!" I heard Fisher shout from the LAAG, no doubt wet from the water splash-up.

I ignored him and kept my focus on my driving, knowing that we only had a few precious seconds before the Wyvern started to chase us again.

"Uhâ€|chiefâ€|we got a problem." Fisher shouted, his voice filled with concern.

I took a glance behind us and noticed three creatures sprinting on all fours after the warthog, getting closer with every second.

They were at least ten feet tall and three hundred pounds of pure muscle, with the bone structure of an animal and the pale, leathery skin of a lurker. They were hunchbacked and their spines jutted out like spikes along their backs all the way down their long, lizard-like tails. They had large claws and feet, and triangular faces. Their eyes were slanted and blood red, and their fangs were easily the size of daggers.

The three creatures continued to sprint towards the warthog, while the Wyvern leaped into the sky and followed the chase from the air.

"Shit, this is not good. Now we have to worry about the big fucking flying dragon AND the fucking Grim Reaper's Hellhounds! Great!" yelled Fisher as he swung the LAAG around and began to fire at the "Reapers."

The Reapers rolled and slid along the water to evade the bullets, their movements executed with such grace and elegance that it was creepy.

"Get us out of here!" Fisher began to panic as a Reaper ran up alongside the warthog, turning its head and snapping its jaws at Fisher.

I swung the steering wheel to the left and slammed into the beast with the warthog, causing it to snarl in pain as it lost its footing and fell.

"Hell yeah!" cheered Fisher as he quickly aimed the LAAG at the Reaper and opened fire, sending dozens of rounds into its body and killing it.

Another Reaper ran up to the left side of the warthog, snarling as it slammed its shoulder into the vehicle. I struggled with the wheel as the warthog was pushed to the right.

I grabbed the wheel with one hand and the FAMAS with the other, lifting the rifle towards the beast's face.

I squeezed the trigger, straightening my arm as the rifle kicked and roared.

The Reaper's face was torn to shreds, flesh and brain matter splashing into the warthog.

"The LAAG's out of ammo!" shouted Fisher, who had been providing supporting fire on the Wyvern behind us.

I glanced to the left, spotting the last Reaper slowly make its way up to the vehicle.

"Get up here!" I ordered the Private. "Move!"

Fisher cursed as he left the LAAG, slowly and carefully making his way across the frame of the vehicle towards the passenger seat.

The Reaper lunged at the warthog and I spun the wheel to the right, causing Fisher to curse loudly as he was hurled into the seat next to me.

The Reaper leaped into the air and landed onto the back of the warthog, breaking off the LAAG and gripping onto the sides of the vehicle with its claws; its weight causing the tail of the warthog to dip dramatically.

"SHIT!" Fisher shouted as the Reaper snapped its jaws at him, almost biting his entire head off. It launched its jaws towards me next, forcing me to lower my head in order to avoid being beheaded.

Fisher grabbed the FAMAS and pressed the muzzle against the beast's neck, pulling the trigger and sending a barrage of rounds deep into the Reaper's chest.

The Reaper raised its head and shrieked as the FAMAS morphed its face into a meaty paste.

I hit the brake and spun the wheel; the warthog power sliding and launching the Reaper's corpse into the swamp water a few yards away.

"You alright?" I asked as I hit the gas again, looking over at Fisher.

"I didn't sign up for thisâ€!" he mumbled, his eyes wide as he caught his breath.

I glanced back, watching in silence as the Wyvern behind us ripped its wings through the air, trying desperately to reach us. It waved its head from side to side as it roared in frustration, spewing acid into the water below and causing steam to rise like fog.

"Look over there, to the west." Said Fisher as he straightened his arm, pointing at the two silhouettes dropping from the sky half a mile away.

The two Wyverns dropped until they were flying a few feet above the swamp water, their momentum creating tiny waves in the water as they picked up speed. Their wings kicked up and down with surprising grace as they straightened their large bodies, trying their hardest to catch up to the warthog.

"That's not goodâ€¦they'll reach us in a matter of minutes." Stated Fisher as he slapped a fresh mag into the FAMAS.

"There's more."

Over a dozen had dived down out of the sky to join the chase; their wings beating in unison as they closed in from all directions.

With renewed vigor the Wyvern behind us continued to give chase, acid dripping from its mouth.

"They're everywhere, and we're sitting ducks out here in this swamp!" realized Fisher as he looked around.

"The sound of the warthog must have alerted them to our presence. I estimate that we have less than three minutes before they reach us en masse." Reported Cortana.

"That's not good." Commented Fisher. "Any ideas, chief?"

"Take the wheel." I ordered as I grabbed his shoulder and pushed him into the driver's seat. I climbed over the frame of the warthog, taking his place in the passenger's seat.

I grabbed the MA5B beside me and raised it to eye-level, holding its frame tightly against my shoulder and arm. I brushed my finger against the trigger and steadied my breath, waiting for the Wyverns to get closer.

"You're not serious, are you?" shouted Fisher in disbelief.

"I'm going to buy us some time. As long as you keep the warthog steady and your foot on the gas, we should be fine." I replied.

"This is fucking insaneâ€¦" mumbled Fisher as he shook his head.

"The maximum range to perform effectively with the MA5B is fifty meters; that's cutting it a little close, chief." Warned Cortana.

"We'll be fine."

The AI grew silent as Fisher pushed down on the gas.

We drove through the swamp for about a mile before the first Wyvern came within range.

I turned to the far east and glared at the monster as it banked

through the air towards the warthog; its comrades close behind.

I pulled the trigger and sent a lone bullet towards the Wyvern; missing by several feet as I became accustomed to the rifles kick and accuracy.

I calmed my breath and fired again; this time digging the bullet deep in the Wyvern's shoulder.

I adjusted my aim and fired off a quick burst, hearing a loud shriek as the rounds tore through the soft tissue of the Wyvern's right wing; creating three rather large holes.

The Wyvern dipped to the right involuntarily, its wings beating faster as it struggled to stay afloat.

I squeezed the trigger again and sent another carefully aimed burst into the Wyverns wing; the small tendons inside tearing apart slowly.

With an ear-splitting shriek the Wyvern's wing gave out and it crashed into the swamp, creating a large splash of water.

"Oh shit!" gasped Fisher as he examined my handiwork before turning back towards the road.

I switched targets and fired at the Wyvern directly behind us, who had managed to catch up surprisingly fast.

A first burst sent a trio of bullets through its snout, while a second took out one of its eyes.

The Wyvern screamed in pain and lifted its head, allowing me to empty an entire mag into its face; the rifle kicking furiously in my hands as it sent dozens of bullets into the Wyvern's skull.

The Wyvern's carcass dropped into the swamp, its head sinking under the water.

I looked around the swamp, a cold chill racing up my spine as I watched the remaining Wyvern's close in on the warthog.

Fifty meters|twenty meters|ten meters|

"Here they come!" shouted Fisher as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

The first Wyvern to reach us swooped overhead and snapped down at Fisher's head; who ducked in the seat and hit the brake, turning the wheel sharply as the Wyvern banked around for another strafe.

The warthog screeched loudly as it slid into a sharp drift, dodging a second Wyvern as it attempted to smash into the side of the warthog.

I ducked as another Wyvern grabbed onto the side of the warthog and roared, sending streams of saliva slamming into the dashboard and my armor.

"HOLY SHIT!" screamed Fisher as he hit the gas and turned the wheel

right, sending us into another drift; missing a collision with another Wyvern by mere inches.

I snapped the rifle forwards and pulled the trigger, sending a full magazine into the mouth of the Wyvern above me. The beast shrieked and leaped away from the warthog, spreading its wings and flying away.

"I'm driving." I growled as I grabbed Fisher and threw him into the passenger seat, taking his place behind the wheel and shoving the MA5B into his hands. "Keep them off me."

"Yes sir!" nodded Fisher as he instantly began to fire on the swarm of Wyvern's around us, his bullets seeming to disappear amidst the wave of flesh.

I slammed my foot on the gas pedal and sent the warthog in a sudden burst of speed, gritting my teeth as the jaws of the Wyverns around the vehicle snapped near my head.

I spun the wheel hard and hit the brake, pushing the warthog into another power slide and whipping the tail of the vehicle into the head of a Wyvern that had landed in front of us.

The Wyvern's head and neck snapped to the side as I kept turning the wheel; hanging on to the side of the vehicle as the warthog spun around in a circle and then shot forward at top speed.

"Damn, you can drive!" commented Fisher as he let the empty magazine slide out of the MA5B, dropping the weapon and replacing it with the FAMAS.

Fisher squeezed the trigger, ripping apart the heads of three Wyverns' that were snapping at his neck.

A Wyvern quickly strafed over the warthog and slammed its claw into Fisher's chest, grabbing him and lifting him out of the warthog.

The Wyvern attempted to climb back into the sky, with Fisher kicking and screaming in its talons.

I hit the brake and grabbed the FAMAS as it fell from Fisher's hands; raising the weapon and firing a burst into the Wyvern's leg.

The beast shrieked and dropped Fisher, causing the marine to drop onto the hood of the warthog with a thud.

I continued to fire on the Wyvern, creating dozens of holes on its back and tail as it flew away.

"WHAT THE FUCK JUST HAPPENED?" shouted Fisher as he panicked and looked around, suddenly aware that he was lying on the hood of the warthog.

I tossed him the FAMAS and gripped the wheel again, pressing the gas and getting us moving again.

Fisher crouched and raised the rifle, keeping the Wyverns behind us at bay with short, controlled bursts.

"Chief, look!" shouted Cortana as she added a new NAV Point on my HUD. I glanced at the NAV marker, spotting a large, murky forest a kilometer to the east of the swamp.

"Hang on!" I shouted to Fisher as I turned the warthog towards the forest, lowering my head as a Wyvern shot a stream of acid at the warthog.

The warthog rushed through the forest as I spun the wheel left and right, sending the warthog twisting through the dense trees.

The Wyvern's tore through the trees as well; some of them barreling through the tree trunks while others leaped through the treetops.

Trees began to wail and groan as they fell under the weight of the Wyverns, sending small quakes through the ground and shaking the warthog.

Fisher crawled back into the passenger seat and kept the rifle aimed behind us; conserving his ammo and only firing when he had a clear shot.

A Wyvern dove from above and crashed into a tree a few yards away from the warthog, forcing me to swerve right to avoid being hit by the falling tree. Fisher sprayed the Wyvern with bullets almost instantly, riddling its body with holes.

"These things just don't give up!" Shouted Fisher in frustration.

"There! To the west!" shouted Cortana as she marked another NAV Marker.

I turned to look at what had caught her attention, spotting a large clearing a kilometer to the west. In the center of the clearing was a giant hole, leading down into an underground, metal tunnel.

I turned the wheel and drove towards the clearing, the sound of falling trees and roars echoing through my ears.

We reached the clearing in seconds and I hit the brake, trying to slow the warthog down a little so that we didn't end up slamming into the roof of the tunnel.

The warthog bounced into the tunnel, the tires screeching as they rolled across the metal floor. I switched on the headlights as we cruised through the dark, empty tunnel; the lights illuminating the metal interior around us.

I glanced back, watching as the Wyverns crowded around the entrance and sent bone-chilling shrieks at us; roaring in frustration and sadness as their prey got away.

I let out a breath I had been holding in as the warthog cruised through the tunnel, the soft hum of the engine and the shaking of the tires calming my heart.

"Did that just happen? Did we really just outrun a horde of flying lizard monsters?" Fisher asked in shock and disbelief, his eyes wide.

He began to lift his hands and feel his face, as if wondering if he was really alive or dreaming.

"Yeah. We did."

He let out a loud sigh and leaned back in his seat, laying his head down and calming his breath.

"You are one kickass driver; you know that? Where did you learn to drive like that?" he asked as he turned to me.

"Years of experience."

"No shit." He laughed, grinning.

He was alive; and to him, that fact alone was worth a smile.

* * *

><p>We followed the tunnel for ten miles before it began to slope upwards again; a light shining through the exit.</p>

The warthog burst out of the tunnel and into the rocky canyon ahead; small clusters of grass and trees scattered around the base of the enormous mountains beyond.

I drove the vehicle over a large, dirt path that twisted and turned up the mountain; connecting with others and creating a network of paths throughout the canyon.

The massive spire-like construct stood on the summit above us; its metal exterior seeming to meld with the rough, jagged cliffs of the mountain. The construct reached hundreds of feet into the air; a soft beam of yellow light shooting from the tip and fusing with the enormous "Sun" in the center of the Core World.

"Whoaâ€œ!" murmured Fisher as he jumped out of the warthog, his MA5B gripped in his hands.

I exited the warthog and grabbed my gear, strapping the FAMAS onto my back as I turned to the rookie. "Come on."

I made my way towards the construct, my rifle raised and swaying in all directions as I searched for any threats. Fisher was close behind me, his rifle swinging in the same manner as he did the same.

We came up to a large metal door built into the side of the spire; decorated with gold and blue colored glyphs and patterns. The door slid open as we approached, causing us to crouch and swing our rifles forward.

A large dome-like room lay behind the door; white, decorated walls surrounding a slick, polished, metallic floor. There was a large hole in the center of the room, with a massive beam of yellow energy shooting up from it and passing through the matching hole in the high ceiling. Runes and glyphs were carved into the walls and floor, resonating a dim blue light and chilling the air.

"Clear right."

"Clear left. The room's empty." Reported Fisher as he lowered his rifle, gazing at the massive beam of energy in the center of the room. "What do you think it is?"

"I don't know." I replied, cautiously walking towards the beam. It resonated heat, warming the air around it.

"We've seen this kind of technology before, chief; on Halo and the Ark. It's definitely Forerunner." Said Cortana, her voice filled with curiosity.

"Ah! Reclaimers! I have been eagerly awaiting your arrival!" shouted a high-pitched, artificial voice from behind the beam of light.

I raised my rifle in surprise, spotting a metal sphere float from behind the beam and hover in front of my face.

The sphere was colored gold, and a large, red eye was placed in the center; a strange symbol carved in the center of it. The eye emitted a red glow around the construct, and aided in keeping it afloat.

"What the hell..." murmured Fisher as he stared at the monitor, dumb-struck.

I lowered my rifle and walked towards the construct, "who are you?"

"Me? I'm 119 Stygian Solace; guardian of Requiem."

H:V

18. II: Loyalties

"_Do you have dreams?"_

"_What do you mean?"_

"_Do you dream about things."_

"_Like what?"_

"_Like the stars, and the moon, and the sunâ€|things we used to cherish back then."_

"_Back when?"_

"_Back before all of this."_

"â€|"

"_I dream. I dream about my home planetâ€|and the teddy bear I had gotten from my mum the day before she diedâ€|and the feeling of hope I would always get when I gazed up at the starsâ€|"_"

"_Jack, stop."_

"_I miss those dreams. I miss those days. I miss that life."_

"_We can never go back; those stars are only in our memories now._"

"_I know. I'm sorry._"

"_We should be heading back soon; Grayson'll probably blow out a blood vessel if he knew that we had left Ragnarok._"

"_Okayâ€|we'll go back to them again Selene; to those old days. Once this is all over we'll leave and head back to our old lives. We'll be normal again._"

* * *

><p>Chapter Twelve: Loyalties

Vanguard

July 10, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ UNSC High Command Base: Easy-Able (HCB-EA), Spira.

I held Selene's Helmet tightly in my hands; the last piece of her that I had left. I had some of the engineers paint it white, and etch the initials "***H44***" onto the back; Selene's Service Tag.

The helmet was a memento of my closest friend; the last remnant of her existence and a treasure that I would cherish for the rest of my life. The helmet would be a physical reminder of her; a constant pain that would prevent me from ever forgetting her and causing her memories to fade into the depths of oblivion.

The last five days had been so surreal; every minute I'd turn and expect to see Selene standing beside me; her elegant eyes gazing back at me. It was almost like I was in a dreamâ€|waiting for that key moment when I'd open my eyes and realize that I had imagined the entire thing.

Noâ€|I wasn't dreaming. I wanted to believe I was; every nerve in my aching body wished that I was.

But I wasn't. This was real. This was now.

Selene was gone, and every time I would sit and battle with my own conscious and thoughts over the matter and try my hardest to convince my intelligence that there was the tiniest, smallest chance of me being wrong about it, I knew it was useless.

I didn't want to know the truth. I would rather live in a cloud of the surreal than to admit to myself that the one shred of hope I had left in the world had been snuffed out before my very eyes.

My mind was stronger than my soul, and for the rest of my life I would cling to one revelation that would fuel my spirits and keep me moving on; even if that revelation was a false hope designed by the emotions and rationalities created by my brain to try and rationalize the irrational:

Selene was not dead.

* * *

><p>I stood atop the small, green hill and saluted the lone MA5B that had been stuck in the ground; over the grave of Selene.</p>

The sun had dipped below the horizon and sent up an arch of brilliant, orange, fiery light; clashing into the mountains in the distance and causing them to glow dimly in radiance. The grass and flowers around the small hill swayed calmly in the breeze, and the cloudless sky was beginning to darken; allowing the flashes of the stars to peek through.

I had been here three times already; in this exact same spot, performing the exact same salute. Words had been carved onto the frame of the rifle; a last tribute to the fallen Spartan:

Selene-H44

"***Boss***"

I felt an odd warmth resonating from my side and I looked down to find the source, staring at the hilt of Energy Sword that was attached to my leg.

The same sword that had pierced Selene's heart and caused her soul to fade into nothingness.

I closed my eyes and turned back to the grave, trying to find the right words to say. This would be my last time standing in front of Selene's final resting place; we were leaving the base tomorrow to continue our war. I dived into the recesses of my soul, reliving the memories we had shared as I tried to word my final farewell.

"You cheated; you reached the comfort of true peace before I could be there to enjoy it with you. I know you're sad, I know you're waiting for what seems like an eternity for me to arrive and share the heavens with you; but wait just a little longer. We'll see those stars again someday."

I turned my head and walked back down the hill, my head lowered as I held her helmet under my arm.

The bloodiest of wars aren't fought with Heroes and Legends, but with Victims and Martyrs.

* * *

><p>Honor tried to hide their emotions and their rage; we had been trained to keep them under control. Nothing was supposed to break us; make us question our own motives and duty. But what about this? Was this included in the "Nothing?" Were we supposed to just shrug off the death of our closest ally and leader and continue with our duty; like the emotionless, heartless, demonic killers that Grayson had dreamed for us to be?</p>

I had no sadness. No depression. No hopelessness.

Just Rage. Hatred. A thirst for blood, for vengeance. Revenge.

That was my motive. That was my fuel. That is what would keep me

living and fighting; that one moment when I would stand with my foot on top of Odin's throat and glare down at him, channeling all the anger, the rage, the memories he had shattered into his mind all at once.

And in that moment I would end his life; fulfilling my vengeance and avenging the death of my fallen comrade. He would feel the same wrath he had given her, and only after that would my life be complete; and I could fade into Nirvanaâ€|to be with her again.

Zeke felt the exact same way I did; I could see it in his actions. His rage had tripled with Selene's death, and the thought of revenge was now an obsession that clouded his judgment and emotions. He was determined to finish this fight; not for himself, but for Selene.

She had risen to accept her call of duty and fight for honor, and we were damned ready to finish what she had started.

We were here; and we were ready.

* * *

><p>"Honor â€"Two will be promoted to Honor-Leader and put in full command over Honor Team. Lord Hood himself will be presenting Honor-One with the Medal of Honor, and several other awards for her feats on the battlefield. Her legacy lives on in your hearts, and I hope that you will not let her sacrifice go to waste. That is all Honor; dismissed!" reported General Hawke as he gave a salute.</p>

We returned the gesture, watching as he turned and left the conference room.

We sat in silence, realizing the awkwardness of moving forward without Selene.

"Van, I'm promoting you to Honor-Leader." Said Hercules as he lifted his head.

"What?" I replied, shocked.

"Protocol says that the next rank in line would be assigned Team Leader. You can't disregard protocol." Stated Zeke from across the room; scratching his combat knife against the metal table.

"Fuck protocol; Boss would have wanted Vanguard to become Leader." He replied.

Zeke remained silent.

We had all made an oath to ourselves; an oath that we would live for Boss now, and do what she would have wanted us to do.

We were carrying out her legacy.

"Vanguard's the only one of us who deserves to be Honor-Leader; he was the one closest to Boss and the only one who knows what she would want from Honor." Stated Hercules.

"Selene." I said.

"What?"

"Her name was Selene." I repeated.

The room grew silent as Hercules and Gizmo let that sink in; the fact that the woman they had grown to care tremendously for had had a true name.

"Van will be promoted to leader. Any objections?" Hercules asked after a few seconds of silence.

"None." Sighed Zeke as he leaned back in his chair.

"Understood. Rest up and try to gather yourselves, Honor; we leave in the morning." I said as I stood, glancing around at my Team.

Hercules, Zeke, and Gizmo.

We wouldn't lose anyone else.

Honor stood and gave a crisp salute before leaving the room, leaving me standing alone.

The promotion made me feel worse; now everyone would expect me to measure up to the bar Selene had left as Team Leader. There was no way I could, and I would be judged because of that.

The promotion was more of a curse than a reward, but at least now I could lead Honor down the right path.

I would keep us moving forwards; following in the footsteps Selene had left for us.

* * *

><p>"Vanguard! Wait up!"

I stopped running and turned back towards Boss, who was bent over and trying to catch her breath.

"_Come on; we need to reach the checkpoint before nightfall." I said as I walked back towards her, scanning the forest around us for any signs of movement. _

"_We've been running for an hour; I need to stop and breathe!" she replied, breathing in large gasps of air. _

_Suddenly Tiger and Zeke burst out of the forest behind us, entering the clearing and stopping as they spotted us instantly. _

"_Oh shitâ€|" mumbled Tiger as he stared at me, his eyes wide with shock. _

_I dropped into a defensive stance as Zeke yelled and charged at me. He reached me in seconds, launching a punch towards my face. I quickly blocked the blow with my left arm, wrapping my right leg around his and jerking it backwards; knocking him off his feet and dropping him to the ground with a thud. _

_Tiger reached me as well and sent a fast kick towards my waist, forcing me to lift my leg and block it with my knee. _

_I side stepped as Zeke lunged at the red flag attached loosely to my waist, causing him to fall back to the ground again. _

_I ducked under Tiger's next punch and jabbed him in the gut, causing him to double over and groan in pain. _

_I quickly grabbed the green flag hanging from his waist and shoved my foot into his chest; sending him hurling backwards to the ground, dazed. _

_Zeke stood and charged me again, sending his fist on a collision course with my face. _

Boss appeared beside me and caught his fist with her right hand, slamming her left elbow into his cheek and then digging her right knee into his gut.

_Zeke shouted in pain and dropped back down to the ground a third time, his green flag being removed by Boss as she stood above him.

-

"_Thanks." I sighed as I turned to Boss, handing her Tiger's green flag. _

"_I told you you wouldn't regret having me as your partner." She replied, smiling._

"_What the fuck was that?" shouted Tiger in shock as he slowly stood, walking over to Zeke and kicking him in the side. "You told me that you could beat Vanguard in a fight any day!"_

"_GAH! I told you earlier that I was having a bad day!" shouted Zeke in response as he held his stomach. _

"_Bah, you worthless prick! Next time I'm picking Hercules as my partner." Growled Tiger as he headed back into the forest; towards Ragnarok. _

"_Need any help getting up?" Boss asked as she stretched her hand out to Zeke, who slapped it away immediately. _

"_Don't get cocky! The only reason you bested me was because today just wasn't my day!" growled Zeke as he stood, huffing at us.

-

"_Yeah, right." Laughed Boss. _

"_Don't worry, Zeke; we won't tell anyone that you got your arse kicked by a girl." I told him as I grinned. _

"_You're damn right you won't! If you ever mention this to anyone, I will personally cut your chest open and use your own intestines to strangle you!" replied Zeke as he stormed off into the forest after Tiger. _

_I turned back to Boss, who was still laughing to herself as she

watched Zeke depart. _

"_Come on," I said as I began to walk forward; towards the checkpoint a few miles ahead. "There's a hot meal waiting for us when we win this thing."_

_Boss nodded and followed me into the forest, the mere thought of steaming lobster warming our stomachs. _

* * *

><p>I blinked; being brought back to the real world from the abyss of my memories.</p>

I was sitting on the roof of a large building, watching the battalions of UNSC marines below me as they scurried around the base; preparing for war. Warthogs and Scorpions drove down the network of roads and streets throughout the base, carrying ammo and supplies to the soldiers nearby.

"I thought I'd find you up here." I heard Zeke say as he walked up to me, taking a seat beside me. "How are ya holdin up?"

"I'm fine."

Zeke turned towards me, his gold visor blocking his gaze. "Don't bullshit me Vanguard; I know she was like a sister to you too."

"Yeahâ€|she wasâ€|" I sighed, lowering my head.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I just wish I could have been there to protect her. If I had been just a little stronger, a little faster; than I could have saved her." I said, the memories of her death rushing back into my mind.

"You did what you could, Van; no one blames you for that. The past is set in stone; there's no point in dwelling on the 'what ifs'. All we can do now is drown our doubts and regrets and move on; they'll only slow us down." Replied Zeke.

"Not all of us are as strong as you, Zeke." I stated, turning towards him.

He turned his head and stared at the soldiers below us, his visor reflecting the fiery light of the sunset.

"I'm not as strong as you think, Vanguard." He finally said.

I grew silent, joining Zeke as he watched the soldiers below us.

"Boss told you her true name?" he suddenly asked, surprising me.

"Yeah, right after our mission with Fire Team Zulu." I answered.

"I thought she would've told you years ago; you were the one closest

to her." he said.

"You already knew it?" I asked him, surprised.

"Yeah. She had told me back in Ragnarok, the night after Sarah's funeral. She had told me that she would always be there to comfort me, and that she shared the same sorrow I felt over Sarah's death. She mentioned her true name in a promise she made to Me." he answered before growing silent.

"Did you tell her yours?" I asked, curious.

He remained silent for a few seconds, before lowering his head. "I don't have a true name, Van; it was taken away and forgotten along with my old life. I don't miss it; this is my life now."

We sat in silence, both of us being thrust into the vacuum of our memories.

* * *

><p>"The war is getting worse. The entire region is under siege by the Covenant Fleet, and more reinforcements keep pouring in from orbit to support their invasion. We've received reinforcements as well, but not nearly the amount that is needed to defend Spira against the Covenant army. Nearly every City and province in the region is under attack, and our armies are spread thin as we attempt to keep control of the planet." reported General Hawke as he stared down at the global map below him.</p>

"And where does Honor come in?" I asked.

"Several Generals throughout Spira have personally requested your assistance in high-priority missions and attacks against the Covenant. Your Team will be sent from battlefield to battlefield; assisting in any ways you can to help strengthen our offensive and raise morale. There's a long and bloody road ahead of you, but I'm confident Honor is up to the task." Answered Hawke.

"Of course, sir; we were trained to be."

19. II: Firewalker

Chapter Thirteen: Firewalker

July 17, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ UNSC High Command Base: Easy-Able (HCB-EA), Spira.

I sighed as I looked down at the stack of papers on the desk, gripping my pencil tightly as I prepared to write. This document would take me at least four hours to write, and I was NOT looking forward to recalling it all, exactly as it had happened, from memory.

My helmet and Energy Sword were placed on the edge of the desk, the light from the ceiling giving them a polished glow. My MA6D was leaning against my chair, as if begging me to pick it up and clean it.

Is that a smudge on the tip of the barrel? And I do recall hearing the rifle make a peculiar noise and jam a little the last time i had used it...

No, Vanguard! No distractions. You need to stay focused. You need to sit here, write these reports, and get them over with.

No distractions.

"You still working on that Missions Report for Hawke?" I heard Zeke exclaim as he entered my room, a bottle of Vodka in his hand.

Damnit.

"Unfortunately." I answered, not even looking up from the page.

"This is your third report this week, Van! Who would have thought that being promoted to Team Leader would be soâ€|boring." He sighed, leaning against the door frame.

"Selene never complained."

"Because she never did any of that shit!" he protested.

I grew silent.

"You could give the promotion back to Hercules; I'm sure he'd be more than willing to waste his R&R sitting behind a desk." He joked.

I grinned, "no thanks. I couldn't live with myself if I made him go through this torture."

"Well hurry up, will ya! The rest of us are going to watch Hercules fight that huge motherfucker from E Company. I want to see you down there in one hour." Said Zeke as he left, leaving me alone.

I sighed again and placed my pencil on the paper, moving my hand as I began to write my report:

UNSC Special Operations 1742649 "Firewalker."

Report beginsâ€|

* * *

><p>July 12, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ aboard UNSC Destroyer Cestus, in orbit over the Vosk Province, Spira._

"_The Covenant has set up a Forward Operating Base in the center of the Vosk Province, with the surrounding towns and cities being occupied by Covenant Battalions and aircraft. Several Covenant Frigates and smaller aircraft patrol the airspace, expressing their dominance over the skies. We believe that the Covenant is rallying their forces to the base, and are preparing to execute a massive attack on the entire province." Reported Fleet Admiral Hawke as Gizmo and I piled into the pelican. _

Gizmo and I were the only two members of Honor assigned to this mission; with Zeke and Hercules being sent halfway across the region to assist the UNSC in a different mission. Admiral Hawke had decided to split Honor Team into two separate cells until Nova Company was able to pick itself back up and begin their global offensive.

_I stepped into the pelican and set my MA6D down in the seat next to Gizmo, turning back to the Admiral. _

"_Your objective is to make your way into the base and place an OSPT inside the main structure. The Orbital Strike Package Triangulator will broadcast the exact coordinates of the base to the Cestus, allowing us to launch a tactical orbital strike directly onto the base. The strike package should destroy the entire base and cripple the battalions nearby, buying us some precious time before the Covenants next attack."_

"_What's our insertion method?" I asked the Fleet Admiral, watching as engineers and technicians scurried around the Hangar Bay behind him._

"_Covenant ships and aircraft are heavily guarding the area, preventing us from sending any type of air support above or around the area. UNSC battalions stationed throughout Vosk are spread thin, so a direct offensive push towards the base would be difficult." Sighed Hawke. "Which leaves a drop from orbit as our only option._"

"_Orbit?" asked Gizmo, surprised. _

"_The pelican will strafe along the edge of the stratosphere and drop you directly over the fire-zone. You'll fall through the sky and land in the forest a few klicks west of your objective._"

"_So you're literally gonna drop us from orbit inside HEV Pods onto the ground?" I asked in disbelief. _

"_Exactlyâ€|except you won't be using HEV Pods." Answered Hawke.

-

"_W-What?" Gizmo stammered, in complete surprise. _

"_The HEV Pods would be visible to Covenant Infantry and aircraft, and easily detected by enemy radar; you'd be shot out of the sky immediately. You will be using a prototype Armor Module to land safely. The Module integrates with your Mark VI Armor and uses Nanomachines to boost the electric pressure of your shields, sort of 'locking' you inside a shell of impenetrable aura." Explained Hawke as he handed me a small, metal, circular device. _

"_An Armor Lock." I said, nodding as I took the device and placed it in the center of my chestplate. _

_The device snapped into place, electrical sparks erupting from my armor as the Nanomachines inside the device integrated with the ones inside my armor. _

"_Once activated the device will convert your shields into an invulnerable wall for five seconds. After that time is up, the device will overload and deactivate, returning your shields to normal. If

you activate the Armor Lock too soon and the timer runs out before you've landed safely, you'll be splattered across the ground with the force of a freight train slamming into a concrete wall at one hundred miles-per-hour." Said Hawke._

I nodded, feeling slightly uncomfortable about the upcoming drop.

"_Once you've landed you are to join up with Fox Patrol Team and head for your objective." Continued Hawke._

"_Fox Patrol Team?" I wondered aloud. _

"_A UNSC Special Forces Team stationed in Vosk. They had been assisting UNSC marines fighting in the province when the Covenant took control of the air; cutting Fox Patrol Team off from evac and leaving them stranded in deep enemy territory."_

"_Speaking of evac; what's our method of extraction after the mission has been completed?" I asked._

"_That's for you to figure out when the time comes. I'm sure you'll be able to find a way out of that hellhole and get back here in time to watch the fireworks." Replied Hawke, his voice confident._

"_Understood."_

"_Then get it done, Honor-Leader." Ordered Hawke as he gave us a crisp salute before turning around and heading back to the bridge._

_We watched silently as he walked away; the pelican's cargo door sliding closed and sealing us inside. _

The pilot gave us a thumbs-up as he hit the ignition, causing the pelican's engines to roar to life. I shifted violently in my seat as the pelican lifted off of the hangar floor, turning in the air before rushing out of the Cestus.

_The pelican burst out into the enormous ocean of space, bright star cluttering the dark expanse of nothingness surrounding us. The realm of outer space stretched on for infinite miles in all directions; a canvas for which all life was painted onto. _

I watched the Cestus shrink into the distance as the pelican descended; the lights on the Destroyer flashing dimly as it drifted through space.

_The massive orb known as Spira hovered silently below us, its surface stretching for hundreds of miles. The mountains and valleys that ran across its surface were displayed in hues of greens and browns, and the blue bodies of water surrounding them were shrouded by the billowing clouds of the atmosphere above them. _

"_It's so beautifulâ€|" I heard Gizmo murmur beside me as he gazed out of the pelican's windshield. _

"_Yeah. It is." I agreed._

Selene always loved gazing up at the starsâ€|_

I stretched out my left arm in front of me and practiced flexing the bones and muscles, feeling the metal screws and Biofoam inside send cold chills through my arm.

"_I still can't believe you can manage to move that thing. Are you sure you'll be able to fight with your arm still healing?" Gizmo asked as he noticed me. _

_The bones in my arm had been fractured and broken in several places less than a week ago from trying to lift Selene; her eight hundred pound set of armor pulling down on my arm. The Medics had said that it was a miracle that my bones hadn't shattered completely, and that it would be an even greater miracle for me to be able to move it again within six months. _

_I had forced the medics to place metal plates and screws in my arm, sticking Biofoam into my bones and reconnecting them so they could heal faster. My arm still hurt like hell, but the pain was bearable.

-

_Due to my rapid cell regeneration the fractured bones would heal completely within a month, allowing me to get the screws and plates removed and returning my arm to normal. _

"_Yeah, me either. It hurts like a motherfucker." I replied as I turned to him. "But I'll be fine. The more I use it, the faster it will heal, right?"_

"_Well, actually, the cells and bone marrow will need adequate time to regenerate and recreate the nerve endings that connected them together; which means that-_

"_Gizmo, shut up." I told him as I leaned back in my seat, breathing out a loud sigh. _

"_Three minutes until we reach the insertion point!" shouted the pilot from the cockpit ahead, taking a glance back at us. _

_I gave Gizmo a nod, grabbing my rifle and standing up. Gizmo did the same, strapping his MA6D to his back as he turned towards the cargo door. _

"_Remember to snap your legs together and tuck your arms into your sides when you jump. Keep your body stiff and try to fall head-first. Don't activate your Armor Lock until I give the signal, or else your bones will shatter into a thousand pieces when you slam into the ground." Reminded Gizmo as he turned back towards me, the floor shifting slightly below us. _

"_Thanks for the info, it's very comforting." I replied sarcastically. _

I grabbed the railing on the ceiling as the pelican took a sudden dive, the floor tilting slightly before evening out as we soared through a light fog of clouds.

_Suddenly the cargo door slid open, causing a strong rush of wind to stampede into the pelican and slam into us. _

_I stared out into the sea of clouds around us, the white fog morphing into the dark ocean of space a few yards above. _

"_Go! Go! Go!" shouted the pilot as he hit a switch, causing a flashing red light to shine from the ceiling. _

_I swallowed my doubts and ran towards the edge of the pelican, pushing off of my feet and front-flipping into the vast air beyond. I spread my arms and legs wide as I began to fall; the wind pushing against my armor. _

_I tilted my body downward so that I was diving head-first, struggling to snap my arms and legs together as I fell. _

_I was plummeting through the air like a bullet, the wind howling fiercely around me as I dropped. _

_I glanced back upwards towards the pelican, glimpsing it as it ascended back into orbit. _

_Gizmo had jumped a second after me; his arms pressed tightly against his green armor as he dropped like a rocket a few yards behind me.

-

_I fell below the clouds and into the wide expanse of air below, gasping in awe as I stared at the land appearing below me. I could see the outlines of forests and mountaintops, and the ominous shapes of Covenant frigates as they drifted through the air. _

_I began to panic, feeling completely powerless as I fell through the atmosphere; unable to do anything but wait. It was nerve-racking not be completely weightless and dropping like a meteorite. _

"_10,000 meters until touch-down; you're doing great, Vanguard!" reported Gizmo through my COMM, his voice surprisingly calm. _

My armor began to heat as I fell faster and faster; the metal glowing a bright red as steam and smoke lifted from it. A bright aura of red flame began to surround my body as my armor cut through the sky at over sixty miles-per-hour, my velocity creating friction and heat against the air itself.

My heart began to race as fell, sending bursts of adrenaline through my body.

"_7,000 meters."_

_I continued to barrel downwards towards the solid ground below; my heart rate quickening with every meter lost. I could scarcely see the fires and craters caused by explosions and gunfire as I gazed at the massive battle that spanned across most of the area. _

"_5,000 meters! Get ready to activate the Lock!" Gizmo shouted through my helmet. _

_I obeyed, staring down at the planet rushing up to meet me.

-

"_3,000!"_

_I closed my eyes, seeing a vivid image of Selene's face in my mind. Her eyes were open; green pupils staring back at me as she smiled. A knife of pain and reality plunged into my heart as I caused the image to fade. _

"_1,000 meters! Activate it now!" _

_I pressed the device on my chestplate and activated the Armor Lock, curling up into a ball as electric sparks began to surge out of the device and surround my armor. The surges of energy solidified around my armor, encasing me in a shield of radiant light, energy, and electricity. _

_I fell through the treetops at an alarming speed; snapping and breaking off tree limbs as I fell towards the forest floor. _

I slammed into the surface at over seventy miles-per-hour, creating an ear-splitting boom as I sank into the ground; causing a dome of debris and mud to fly into the air. The ground began to shake around me as I came to a halt; a twenty meter long crater surrounding my body. The dirt around me was scorched and burned, and my armor was charred in several places.

The Armor Lock overloaded and deactivated, causing the device to short-out and die instantly.

_I struggled to rise to my feet and detach myself from the imprint I had made in the crater when I had landed. I stood and caught my breath, noticing the smoke rising from my armor. _

_I took the useless device off my chestplate and tossed it into the forest, walking out of the crater to go rendezvous with Gizmo.

-

_The distant roar and thunder of gunfire and explosions constantly filled the air, a clear sign that we had dropped into yet another battlefield. _

_I found him crawling out of his own crater a few yards away, his armor charred and smoking as well. _

"_You alright?" I asked him, sparks dancing around his armor as his Armor Lock disengaged. _

"_Of course I am! That was fucking amazing!" exclaimed Gizmo, standing and grabbing my shoulders. "Can we do that again?"_

"_Another time. Right now we need to find Fox Patrol Team and complete the objective. Is your Datapad still operational?"_

"_Yeah."_

"_Then lead the way." I ordered as I retrieved my rifle. _

* * *

><p>We headed east through the thick forest towards the Covenant

structure a mile away; the frigates above drifting silently through the air. We encountered no enemy troops or patrols, but the sound of distant machinery and the sense of tension never left the air.

_We entered a small clearing; patches of green grass resting in a field of dirt and mud, with small bushes scattered around the edges.

-

_We walked through the clearing cautiously, our rifles held at eye-level and swaying wildly as we searched for hostiles.

-

"_Smoke." Whispered a voice to my left, causing me to instantly turn towards the noise, unable to find its exact source. _

"_Flame." I replied, speaking the second half of the code phrase._

_Three UNSC soldiers stood from behind the trees and bushes they were hidden behind, walking towards us cautiously as they brandished their weapons. _

_I looked at them in surprise; shocked that I wasn't able to detect their presence earlier. _

"_Command said they were sending in Spartans, but I didn't think they were actually telling the truth." Said a tall soldier with emerald green eyes and brown hair. He easily six feet tall, with a small body frame and a stern face. He wore a lightweight set of standard armor and a helmet; an Optics Scope attached to the top of the helmet and covering his left eye. His SRS-99 Sniper Rifle was slung over his back. The word "***Wolf***" was scratched onto his left shoulder plate. _

"_You must be Fox Patrol Team." I replied as I looked over the three soldiers, grinning behind my helmet. This should be interesting._

"_Aye." Nodded Wolf before turning back to introduce us to his teammates. _

"_This is Recoil, our heavy weapons specialist and demolitions expert. If you need someone to take out a Covie Wraith or Phantom, then he's your man." Wolf said as he pointed to a tall soldier standing beside him. _

Recoil was over six feet tall, and two hundred pounds of pure muscle. He had caramel tanned skin and striking blue eyes; with short blonde hair jutting out of his helmet. He wore a set of standard UNSC armor, and his dog tags hung visibly around his neck. A rocket launcher was held in his hand, and a Spartan Laser was strapped to his back. He gave us a nod as we glanced at him, a small grin on his face.

"_And this is Ghost; our scout and marksman. He's a legend back home on Earth; he managed to kill fifty Elite Minors during the battle of New Mombasa." Wolf said as he pointed to the soldier that was leaning on a nearby tree. _

He wore a black set of UNSC armor and a matching balaclava; his abnormal yellow eyes darting in all directions as he constantly scanned for things to shoot at. An SMG with an attachable suppressor was gripped in his hands and a silenced M6D magnum was holstered on his waist.

"_So these are the fabled Spartans?" asked Ghost as he glanced at us. "From the stories I've heard about the legendary Honor Team, I was expecting something a bit moreâ€|menacing._

* * *

><p>"The Covenant occupy most of the surrounding area, and have battalions of troops and armor stationed and ready to defend their territory. More and more troops are entering Vosk each day through the FOB in Kaliope, and are fortifying Covie control of the province. Pretty soon the entire Vosk province will be filled with Covenant forces." Reported Wolf.

"_Which is bad." Added Ghost._

"_The 109_th_ Expeditionary has been fighting heavily with the Covenant for days, trying to reach the enemy FOB and stop the flow of incoming troops to Vosk. They're doing a damn good job of giving the Covies hell, but without any air support or reinforcements they're quickly being backed into a corner. Pretty soon the Covenant will be able to flank the 109_th_ and surround the entire battalion, slaughtering them from all sides and securing Covenant control in Vosk. If the 109_th_ were to fall, then the Covenant would gain control of the Vosk province and get one step closer to taking all of Spira." Continued Wolf. _

"_The Covenant loves to invade our planets and wreck our shitâ€| " mumbled Ghost as he sighed._

"_Maybe you'd like to climb aboard one of their Flagships and complain to their leader about it?" growled Recoil._

"_Maybe you'd like to get on your knees and suck this big di-_"

"_Shut it, you two!" barked Wolf at the two soldiers._

They grew silent, glaring at one another with murderous intent.

"_The 109_th_ has been trying to cross the Hyperion Fields and reach Kaliope; the village where the Covenant plans to rally its forces. This is most likely the 109_th'_s final assault and they're being met by heavy Covenant resistance. If we join up with the 109_th_ and help them push into Kaliope, then we should be able to plant the orbital marker and complete our mission." concluded Wolf._

A distant explosion shook the ground and the trees, and a loud boom filled the air.

"_Sounds like the battle is getting pretty nasty..." Commented Wolf as he looked around._

I gave him a nod. "Then we should go and join the fray."

* * *

><p>The Hyperion Fields were massive; several miles of beautiful, dew-covered grass tundra stretched on in all directions. The village of Kaliope stood five kilometers ahead, and a large cement road broke from the forest edge and stretched across the fields; reaching the village and disappearing from sight. The sky was a breathtaking shade of luscious blue, and soft, billowing clouds dotted the air. Covenant frigates loomed in the distance, ruining the picture-perfect canvas.

_The 109_th_ Expeditionary Battalion was sprawled in front of us, fighting relentlessly against the hordes of Covenant standing between them and Kaliope. _

_Fifty Warthogs were scattered across the 109_th_ 's forces, their LAAGs ablaze and sending swarms of bullets into the air. UNSC soldiers and ODSTs were crouched around the vehicles, joining their firepower with the Warthogs as they slowly tried to advance on the village ahead._

_A dozen MDT004 Vektor tanks were commanding the entire battalion; their massive 90mm Cannons creating an ear-splitting roar as they fired. _

_The tanks were huge, easily twice as big as the M808B Scorpion Tank variants. The Vektor's possessed dual 90mm High Velocity Cannons attached to the top of the frame, allowing it to fire two Tungsten AP rounds at once. The frame of the tank was bulky and constructed of Grey Titanium-A, allowing the tank to be more durable than the Scorpion variant but at the cost of speed and maneuverability. The threads were long and thick, which prevented the Vektor from being as agile as other tanks. Two M247T Chainguns were mounted on both sides of the tank, further increasing its deadly firepower. _

The Vektor's were like giants among the troops and Warthogs, raising morale and filling the air with murderous tungsten shells.

The battle on the fields continued to rage. The Vektor tanks were busy trading mortars and shells with enemy Wraiths across the fields while the Warthogs engaged Covenant Ghosts in fierce vehicular dogfights. UNSC infantry and Covenant infantry were trading fire as well, adding their fire to the fray.

A stray plasma mortar arced through the air and plummeting into the forest ten meters away from me, exploding into the trees and causing them to fall. We took that as a sign to get moving.

_We ran towards the 109_th_, keeping our heads down as we went. Within minutes we had reached the battalion; passing Warthogs and soldiers as we searched for a CO._

"_Watch it on the right!" I shouted as I watched a plasma mortar drop towards our right, slamming into a Warthog and creating a tower of flame and plasma. The soldiers around the vehicle screamed and shouted as they were caught on fire and sent airborne; some of their comrades being incinerated instantly. _

_Wolf crouched and raised his rifle, taking precise shots at Covie infantry that had stumbled too far into our forces. _

"_Here we go! Remember our scores from last time, Ghost?" Recoil asked his comrades as he hefted his Rocket Launcher, preparing to raise some hell._

"_I believe I was winning by thirteen kills!" Ghost shouted as he opened fire with his suppressed SMG, the machine gun making a series of low clicks as it fired._

"_Bullshit!" Recoil shouted in protest, firing his launcher and causing a Covie Ghost careening towards him to explode in a flash of fiery light. _

I shook my head as I raised my rifle, dropping down into a crouch and moving beside Wolf. "Are they fucking insane?"

"_Their __methods may be a littleâ€|unorthodox, but they're damn good soldiers, Spartan." Wolf chuckled, squeezing the trigger of his rifle and blowing a hole into a jackal scout's chest._

"_I wonder if they'll let me join in their game!" I heard Gizmo exclaim nearby, spotting him a few feet behind me; crouched and staring at the two Spec Ops soldiers, completely disregarding the Covenant troops attacking us. _

"_I know exactly what you mean." I said to Wolf, sighing._

_Three Jackal Skirmishers appeared from behind the ruins of a Warthog, and before I could even pull the trigger and open fire on the aliens, a burning rocket smashed into the ground at their feet, incinerating them where they stood and leaving nothing but a smoking, burning crater behind. _

"_That's three more kills for me! I'm up to Seventy four!" laughed Recoil as he placed another tube into his rocket launcher, no doubt adding onto his kills from Fox Patrol's previous missions._

"_You stole my kills, you dumbass!" Ghost shouted in reply. _

"_Fox! Let's move!" Wolf shouted as he stood and began to continue forward, in search of a Commanding Officer. _

I looked back at Gizmo and gave him a nod, letting him know that we'd be following Wolf as well.

In seconds we were following Wolf as he moved through the Warthogs, tanks, and soldiers around us; occasionally asking the marines nearby where their CO's were.

_Mortars continued to rain down on the 109__th__, forcing us to move carefully and keep our heads low as the bright orbs of plasma fell around us. _

_Every few meters we'd enter a firefight, and our reactions would be so immediate that it was like we'd rehearsed it earlier. Wolf would instantly crouch down and raise his rifle, while Gizmo and I dropped to one knee behind him. Behind us, Wolf and Recoil would remain standing, their weapons raised over our heads. _

We would drop into our phalanx of sorts constantly, slaughtering whatever threat led ahead of us. Marines around us that witnessed our firefights would shout and cheer in joy, raising their weapons over their heads and boosting our spirits.

"_Oi! Spartans! Bloody hell they really are Spartans! HA HA HA!" came a loud, hoarse voice above the roar of the battle. _

_We looked up and spotted a torso of a Sergeant Major poking out of the metal latch leading into the cockpit of the Vektor towering to our right. _

_The man was maybe forty years old, with long, shaggy black hair and a large beard that covered most of his mouth and reached the bottom of his chest. He wore a tattered brown leatherjacket with the 109_th_ symbol patched onto the chest and shoulders. A brown helmet sat on his head, and a set of black headphones were placed on top of it._

"_Are you the one in command around here?" I asked the Sergeant, lifting my head to gaze at him. _

"_Aye! Name's Higgins! Richard Billy Mchaulsen Jeremiah Higgins the eleventh!" laughed the Sergeant in reply as he waved at us. "It's a pleasure to kill Covie Lunk-heads alongside ya, Spartan!"

-

"_Greatâ€|a redneck tank driverâ€|" mumbled Ghost beside me, sighing._

"_You're complaining again?" Recoil laughed, placing his hand on Ghost's back._

"_Fuck you."_

"_You boys need a ride?" Higgins asked, patting the side of the Vektor Tank._

_Wolf turned and looked at me, his idea channeling through his eyes.

-

No fucking wayâ€|

"_Of course!" exclaimed Gizmo in sheer fascination behind me, answering for all of us. _

I watched as Gizmo jumped onto the Vektor and took a seat on the left side of the hull.

_Ghost and Recoil followed Gizmo, arguing with each other as they sat on the left side of the Vektor. _

Wolf turned and shrugged at me, grinning. "You only live once, right?"

_Wolf jumped onto the tank and took a seat on the right side of the tank beside Gizmo, his rifle cradled in his lap as he scanned the battlefield ahead of us. _

_I sighed and jumped onto the front of the tank, taking a seat on the "nose" of the vehicle; the tank's large cannons hovering over my head. _

_Higgins laughed in joy as he dropped back down into the cockpit of the tank, closing the latch above him. _

"_This is insane!" I said to myself as the tank roared to life and began to surge forwards, the cannons swaying as if they were scouring the fields for something to fire at. _

_The other Vektor tanks followed our lead as Higgins moved us through the 109_th_ forces and towards the Covenant battalion. The soldiers of the 109_th_ advanced behind the row of Vektors, with the Warthogs following close behind. _

"_Give em hell!"_

"_Show those Covie bastards what we're made of!"_

_I glanced around at the marines as they chanted and shouted, their renewed vigor intimidating the Covenant troops ahead. _

We crossed the fields and clashed with the Covenant waiting beyond, Warthogs literally crashing into ghosts while marines and charged into Grunts and Jackals; weapons ablaze.

_Higgins fired the Vektor's cannons, shaking the tank violently as he sent a 90mm Tungsten shell into the front of a ghost trying to swerve past us. The enemy vehicle exploded and was sent airborne, its flaming wreckage crashing into a second ghost nearby. _

I squeezed the trigger of my MA6D and fired on the Covie troops around the tank, killing some while missing others. Can you blame me? I was firing from atop a moving tank! Cut me some slack!

_Wolf was having much better luck with his sniper rifle, scoring headshots on the jackals and Elite minors that happened to pass into his scope. _

_Recoil had decided to put his Spartan Laser to good use and send bright, blood red beams of energy at the Wraiths ahead of us, burning holes straight through their armor and killing the Elites in the cockpits. _

_Higgins caused the Vektor to swerve wildly to the left, barely avoiding a plasma mortar as it dropped to the ground. He fired the cannons again, blowing twin holes into the hull of the Wraith that had fired on us. _

_The 109_th_ stormed its way through the fields, the Vektors bringing up the frontlines and massacring everything in their paths. The remaining thirty Warthogs were following close behind the tanks, and the infantry brought up the rear; sweeping up any remaining Covenant forces that managed to survive the Vektor's war path.

The remaining Covie troops on the fields fled back to Kaliope, knowing that the battle was lost.

_The fields belonged to the 109_th_ now: we had won the battle._

But this was only a warm up.

"_Hell yeah! You better run, you alien assholes!" shouted Ghost as he watched the Covie troops flee towards the barricaded village, his voice filled with disgust._

"_That was too easy; we basically just steam-rolled through the fields." Wolf said as he watched the village, and the frigates hovering over it._

"_It's almost like the Covenant are inviting us into the village." I replied, skeptical._

Could it be a trap?

"_WAHOO! Now that's what I'm talkin bout! It's been ages since Big Bessie's been on a battlefield and she's loving it; ain't ya, darling? HA HA HA!" shouted Higgins as he popped his torso out of the Vektor and patted the hull again, absolute glee in his eyes. _

_He named the tank Big Bessie? _

"_Am I the only one who thinks that our driver is off his fucking rocker?" I heard Ghost mumble, just low enough so that Higgins couldn't hear._

_Higgins laughed maniacally again, turning his head to stare at Kaliope. "Sit tight, boys! We'll be rolling into that village pretty soon to shove our feet up some Split-Chin's arse!" _

* * *

><p>I cursed and grabbed my writing hand, feeling the veins and tendons inside my hand tense and throb in pain. I let the pencil fall down to the paper, grabbing the glass of water resting on the desk and taking a sip.</p>

I allowed myself a few minutes to take a break and let my hand recover, my mind struggling to cling to the memories it was forced to remember.

I looked out of the window on the far wall and watched the sunset, gazing at the beautiful shades of burning light as they touched the horizon.

I frowned and turned back towards my paper, sighing again as I picked up the pencil and began to writeâ€¢

* * *

><p>As we moved closer and closer to Kaliope, I began to grow worried. VERY, worried.

_We were up against A LOT of opposition. The skirmish in the fields were a walk in the park compared to what we faced in Kaliope. _

_For starters, the Covenant was prepared for our arrival; barricades

cluttered the streets, snipers and rocket-wielding grunts were positioned on the roofs of buildings, Shade turrets were placed throughout the village, and infantry was stationed along the streets. Wraiths waiting in the center of the streets and roads, their cannons heating up as they prepared to bombard us with mortars. The village was now a fortress, with the Covenant FOB towering in the center of it all._

But that wasn't even the worst part.

Covenant frigates were adrift above the village, and more than willing to decimate our advance with air assaults and heavy fire. They wouldn't risk friendly fire on their own troops or fire when we entered the village, but they would definitely be capable of preventing us from even REACHING the village.

"_We're fucked." Ghost plainly confirmed, summing up everyone's thoughts as we gazed at the village._

"_Maybe, but I've always liked a challenge." Replied Recoil._

"_This isn't a challenge, this is a fucking massacre!" Ghost protested. He might've been right; those frigates would wreak a lot of havoc. "This has turned into a suicide mission!"_

"_It was always a suicide mission, soldier." Stated Wolf, his voice grim._

"_Suicide mission or not, it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters to us is reaching that FOB and planting the Orbital Marker. If we all die, then at least we'll be able to take this entire village with us." I commented._

We all grew silent, our minds trying to wrap around the fact of all of us dying today. Would it be worth it?

_The 109_th_ was getting closer and closer to Kaliope, our infantry keeping their heads down as jackal snipers began to shoot wildly at them. No one was killed by the snipers, and their shots usually missed their targets drastically. _

_We moved along the large road leading into Kaliope, planning to follow it into the center of the village. The Vektors roared savagely as they rolled over the cement road, while the Warthogs followed close behind. _

"_Here we go! Hang on to your panties, ladies!" I heard Higgins shouted to us as he poked his head out of the cockpit._

_When the 109_th_ battalion came half a kilometer away from Kaliope, all hell broke loose._

_It was like a switch was activated and both sides opened fire in unison. Plasma mortars and charges swarmed towards the 109_th_, while 90mm Tungsten shells and bullets of every variety were sent back at the Covenant. _

_Our Vektor swung wildly to the right as Higgins fired our cannons, creating a large hole in a building and blasting off a chunk of wall; killing the jackal sniper on the roof and smashing a squad of grunts

below the building with rubble. _

_Plasma mortars began to rain down on the road, creating smoldering craters and obliterating several Warthogs and a Vektor in bright flashes of light. _

The other Vektor tanks sent volleys of tungsten shells into the village, blowing chunks out of buildings and even causing some of them to collapse. Covie troops scurried around in panic as buildings and debris fell to the ground, crushing them underneath.

_I held onto our Vektor for dear life, the tank shaking and trembling as Higgins avoided plasma mortars and drove us through forward.

-

"_That's not good." I heard Gizmo say through the COMM as he lifted his head towards the frigates above the village. _

Higgins, heads up!" shouted Wolf as a frigate above the city opened fire, sending a defeaning boom through the air and a large plasma bolt towards us.

Higgins cursed as he took the Vektor off the road, slamming us through a nearby building and sending debris splashing into my armor.

The plasma bolt struck the road and exploded, vaporizing the troops around it and destroying four Warthogs within its blast radius. A large, charred crater was left in its wake, smoke billowing from the melted ground.

Higgins lifted the Vektor's cannons and fired shells at the frigate, the tungsten slugs managing to reach the massive ship and exploding on impact. A glimmering, bluish shield protected the ship from the tungsten shells, allowing it to continue its bombardment on the 109th.

The two other frigates above Kaliope began to fire on us as well, hoping to annihilate us before we reached the village.

Goddamnit! Those ships are tearing us apart!" cursed Ghost as he watched a plasma bolt disintegrate another Vektor tank.

The bombardment from the three frigates was relentless, but the 109th was able to push into Kaliope. Vektor tanks smashed through buildings and paved the way, while the Warthogs and infantry did their best to keep the Covenant forces at bay.

_ "WAHOO! Take THAT ya no good, rotten, alien pricks!" bellowed Higgins as he fired on a pack of Grunts cowering behind an energy shield, sending them sky high with a single tungsten shell._

Recoil shouted a battle cry as he fired his Spartan Laser over and over, creating smoking holes through Elites and disabling Wraith tanks with precise shots.

I lowered my MA6D and squeezed the trigger, slaughtering a trio of jackals that had tried to run past our Vektor. UNSC soldiers quickly moved to cover our tanks flank, giving me nods of encouragement.

The 109th pushed through Kaliope, tearing down the Covenant defenses in their path. To our horror the frigates continued to bombard our charge, decimating nearby streets and buildings as they attempted to slaughter everything in the village and stop us from reaching the FOB.

After twenty minutes of fighting we reached the FOB, which had been built in the center of a large intersection. The Covenant had amassed a large resistance of Wraiths, infantry, and Shade turrets around the tower, and reinforcements were no doubt on their way from the surrounding areas.

We had to move fast.

_ "Let's go! Let's go!" Wolf and I ordered our comrades in unison as we jumped off of the Vektor, rifles raised as we headed towards the base. In seconds we were under heavy fire, as if the world itself was condemning us to death._

The plan was simple: the 109th would keep the Covenant busy while Fox Patrol slipped into the tower and planted the Orbital Marker. After the marker was set we would retreat from the city, and hopefully watch the fireworks from a safe distance.

It was simple, right? I mean, what could go wrong?

_ "Keep low! Keep low!" I shouted as I ran towards the tower, plasma literally swarming past my entire body. My shields would flash constantly as a stray charge splashed into me, forcing me to quickly find cover and let them recharge._

We moved as quickly as possible, our weapons roaring in unison as we fired at anything that shot at us. I would constantly spot Covenant soldiers either running to or away from us, and when I blinked, they would be dead; either taken down by one of my comrades or the 109th behind us.

Recoil was hit in the leg by a needler spike sometime during our rush, but somehow had managed to shrug off the wound and continue unaffected.

_ "MORTAR!" I heard someone shout as a bright light arced down on us, contempt to send us to the very pits of Tartarus. I lifted my head and spotted the large orb of plasma as it came sheer meters away from slamming into both me and Wolf, the heat radiating from it causing my armor to smoke._

With inhuman speed Gizmo grabbed us and threw us to the ground; wrapping his arms around us and shielding us with his body. Mere milliseconds before the mortar struck and killed us all his armor began to glow hazel blue, encasing him in a shielding aura of energy.

The mortar slammed harmlessly onto Gizmo's Armor Lock, splashing off his armor and melting the ground around us.

_ "Holy shitâ€|thanks." I gasped as Gizmo lifted me and Wolf to our feet, deactivated the armor lock and giving us a nod._

_ "Come on." Spoke the green armored Spartan as he turned and sprinted towards the tower, with us close behind._

_ We reached the Fob and killed the guards around it; using fragmentation grenades to tear apart the Shades nearby._

_ "Standby." Gizmo said as he examined the massive, sealed door leading into the tower._

_ We waited impatiently as he began to input commands into his Datapad, the sounds of battle continuing to rage behind us._

_ "Fuck this." Growled Recoil as he lifted his Spartan Laser and sent a beam of red energy through the door; creating a large, smoldering hole._

_ "After you." Recoil said as he turned to me, grinning._

_ I quickly stepped through the hole and looked around._

_ A large, blue, mass of light rose from the center of the tower all the way up to the top: a gravity lift of some sort._

_ I retrieved the Orbital Marker from my waist and activated it, placing it in the gravity lift and watching in silence as it began to rise._

_ "Objective complete." I said as I turned around and stepped back through the hole and into the battlefield beyond._

"_FULL RETREAT!" Wolf shouted as we headed back towards Higgin's Vektor, our message being relayed to the battalion by the soldiers nearby. _

_ We reached the Vektor and climbed aboard as it began to turn and leave the city, chunks of road and debris being flung into the air as the Covenant continued to hammer our positions. _

_ We had managed to make it all the way back to the Hyperion fields at the edge of the village before our Vektor was hit by a plasma bolt._

_ I was sent airborne along with the others as the tank was overwhelmed by an intense blast of heat and light, exploding instantly and hurling our bodies to the ground. Flames towered into the air as the tank sat in ruins, Higgins burning corpse somewhere inside the wreckage._

_ I slowly rose to my feet and grabbed Wolf's arm, my entire body burning in pain and my head groggy. _

_ I saw Fox Patrol Team groan and cough as they struggled to stand as well, their eyes widening as they stared at the Vektor. _

"_Come on." I wheezed as I grabbed Gizmo and lifted him to his feet, placing his arm over my shoulder and helping him walk. He had broken his femur during the explosion and could barely stand, shouting in pain with every step he took. _

_ We slowly stumbled through the fields, glancing around at the

soldiers of the 109th as they retreated back into the forest.

I lifted my head towards the sky and activated my COMM, instantly being connected to the Cestus. "This is Honor-Leader. The Marker has been set and we are out of the blast radius. Blow it up."

A series of distant booms echoed through the sky, and I could clearly see the flashes of bright light shine through the dark of space. Six massive streaks of yellow, orange, and red light fell through the night and struck the FOB in the center of Kaliope. The tower was torn apart and sent crashing to the ground in a wave of searing flames and rubble, while more and more streaks of light bombarded the area around it.

_The Covenant frigates overhead we hit by the MAC rounds as well, their hulls being torn to shreds and ablaze in brilliant explosions.

_The orbital strike lasted for a little over a minute; managing to destroy the frigates, the FOB, and transform the center of Kaliope and everything else within a kilometer diameter into a fiery, chaotic wreckage. _

The soldiers of the 109th shouted and cheered in joy as they gazed at Kaliope, knowing that they had won.

"_Eh, I've seen better fireworks during the annual fourth of July party back on Reach." Grunted Ghost as he turned and headed into the forest._

We grinned and followed close behind, the cheers of our fellow soldiers still ringing in our ears.

* * *

><p>I stopped writing and removed my pencil from the page, staring at the words on the paper.</p>

"VANGUARD! GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE, ALREADY!" I heard Zeke shout from outside the building, clearly drunk.

Alright, fine. I'll relax.

I grinned and wrote three final words on my paper, before heading out of the door:

End of report.

20. II: Volare

Volare: to fly. To ascend. To rise. To reach above. To touch the beyond. To reach the height of all knowing, the birth of all existence. Volare: to be above life itself. To fall from paradise and live with the corrupted. To be reborn.

Chapter Fourteen: Volare

**July 21, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ UNSC High Command Base:

Easy-Able (HCB-EA), Spira.**

"Iâ€|I can't believe itâ€|this shouldn't be possibleâ€|" murmured the Doctor as he examined my left arm, his eyes widening in fascination and shock.

"Is there a problem?" I asked him, eager to put my armor back on. The air in the Medical Bay was cold as ice, and goose-bumps had formed on my skin as I shivered slightly. I felt extremely vulnerable without my armor, like a piece of my soul itself had been taken away. It had become a second skin for me, and its absence was making me uncomfortable.

"No, there isn'tâ€|but that in itself is a major problemâ€|" the Doctor said, letting go of my arm and scratching his nose as he jotted down some notes.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Your arm has completely healed! The Bone marrow has somehow mended itself at a faster rate than we had originally anticipated! Your shoulder blade has mended as well, and is stronger than ever! The muscles, tendons, and veins have reconnected, and it's as if you hadn't even broken your arm in the first place!" exclaimed the Doctor as he stared at me, as if his gaze would unlock the secrets to my rapid healing.

I had broken the bones in my arm and snapped my shoulder blade more than two weeks ago. Normally, an injury like that would hospitalize a person and keep them from even lifting the arm for several weeks. It would take a maximum time of three months for a normal person with my exact injuries to heal completely.

My arm had completely healed itself in less than two weeks.

I wasn't surprised. The wounds I had received during the Battle for Haven weeks ago had healed completely as well; the puncture wounds where I had been stabbed by several pieces of shrapnel had closed and morphed into a series of long, milky white scars.

"So are we done here?" I asked, standing and preparing to head back to the Armory to put my armor back on.

"Iâ€|I guess so. I would keep you here to perform some tests and administer some medicine, but it'll just be a waste of time. You Spartans are a medical fascination; your bodies are capable of performing feats that normal humans could only dream of doing! If you would allow us to run some tests and take a few blood samples, we could research your body's abilities and create vaccines and medicine for normal people! You could help save millions of lives!" Exclaimed the Doctor, excitement in his voice.

I turned and headed for the door, stopping before leaving the room.
"I already do."

* * *

><p>I left the Med Bay and went immediately to the Armory, letting out a sigh of relief as the technicians put my armor back on. I slipped Selene's helmet back over my head, grinning as I stared out

of the HUD.<p>

Home sweet home.

After visiting the Armory I decided to stop by the Command Center, eager to find out if Hawke had issued another mission for Honor Team. After returning back to Easy-Able Hawke had forced Gizmo and me to take some time off for Rest and Relaxation, an order that completely horrified us. We were beyond eager to get our asses back on the battlefield; we weren't willing to just sit around while marines were out there fighting for their lives!

A few days after our return to Easy-Able Hawke had issued a mission for Zeke and Gizmo, leaving Hercules and me shouting in frustration and dread. Hawke had promised that he would have work for us soon, but I was beginning to doubt.

And so here we were; two Spartans forced to sit on our asses all day and "rest," while our comrades were off destroying Covenant frigates and having fist-fights with Elites.

I was once again thrust into a state of extreme sadness when my visit to the Command Center ended in failure:

Hawke had not issued a new mission for us.

My spirits were lifted slightly when the secretary had given me a letter from Nicholai, causing a wide grin to form on my face.

I hadn't heard from Nicholai or Akiba since our exploits in Haven, and I was beyond eager to read the letter:

Eto bylo davno, Belyi Rytsar!

How have you been?

How are things on the frontlines?

How many more Covies have you sent on their 'Great Journey?' Ha ha!

**I apologize, Spartan; I don't mean to overwhelm you with questions. I'm curious about how things are in the outside world; I haven't seen much of it lately. I've decided to stay in Haven and help them secure the city; there are still Covie troops hiding within the city. Nova Echo and Delta are abuzz with stories about your feats in battle: everyone's talking about the Spartan Demon who cut through dozens of Covenant soldiers with two Energy Swords. **

Akiba is fine, by the way. During Archangel he had been hit almost head-on with a mortar. There were third degree burns all over his body and heated shrapnel had sliced through his spine, severing the nerves. He's been recovering in the Med Bay for weeks now, and the medics say he'll be there for six months. He'll never walk again.

**I've had a lot of time to think about things for once; it's a nice change of pace from the constant fighting and killing. I think I'm going to retire, Spartan. Haven was the ninth battle that I've fought in, and I've had my fair share of war. I think, in a few months, I'm

going to head back to Earth and return to my family in Stalingrad. I have a daughter that I miss very much, and a wife who I haven't seen in nine years. They've been my only inspiration, my only reason to keep fighting; to keep living. **

War is an interesting concept, Spartan. Only during times of war and despair do people care about each other; only then do we realize the flaws and weaknesses of humanity. Only when we're faced with a threat large enough to bring about our end, do we, as a species, unite and face our common enemy. It's interesting to think about. We've fought with ourselves for hundreds upon hundreds of years, but only in times of great need do we band together. As a species, we are uncaring. We are weak. And when this war is over: when this threat has left our consciousness, we will return to what we are. Divided, cruel, and uncaring.

**In the end, we're no different than the Covenant. **

I apologize, I'm beginning to ramble. Take care, Spartan, and hopefully our paths will cross again: if not on the battlefield, than on our homeland, with a bottle of Vodka in our hands and smiles on our faces.

PustÊ¹ VsevyshniÄ- napravlyatÊ¹' vashe serdtse I zaostritÊ¹ vashe svirepostÊ¹

Nicholai

* * *

><p>The sun was shining and Easy-Able was abuzz with activity. Marines and Mercs were constantly moving throughout the base, and pelicans would come and go through all hours of the day. Supplies would be transported into the base by giant trucks and Falcons, and ragtag battalions of soldiers returning from the battlefield would stop at the base and rest before moving on to the next battle.</p>

It was noon and my stomach was roaring in anger, so I decided to head to the cafeteria for lunch. Marines and Mercs were seated at the long tables, talking with squad mates and comrades as they ate their meals.

I sat at a table alone, my plate filled with French Fries, four Hamburgers, and a pool of Mash Potatoes. My helmet rested on the table beside me, and my hands were clenched together in front of me. My mind was miles away, once again trapped by the infectious thoughts that had crept into my conscious. My stomach continued to grow, but my mind was quickly overpowering the lesser organ.

"I'm not gonna to be the one to write it." I heard a marine at the table across from mine say. He was sitting with four other marines, their plates untouched and their faces solemn and grim. Their eyes were glassy and dull; filled with sadness and unease.

I had seen those eyes before. Several times. Countless times.

They were the eyes of almost every soldier I had seen since I first arrived on Spira. Eyes that have seen death. Murder. Despair. Sacrifice.

They were the eyes of those that understood what war truly was.

"Someone has to, and you were the one closest to him." The soldier beside him said.

"No. I won't write it."

"You were there, Richard." The soldier beside him reminded.

"I know that! Don't fucking remind me! Every bone in my body wishes I was somewhere else, anywhere else. If I could go back to that moment, and take his place, I would've. He didn't deserve that. He never did. Don't you ever fucking remind me that I was there. I relive that moment every single day." Replied the first soldier, Richard, as tears formed below his eyes.

The table was silent for a few moments.

"He has a son. He'll be six next month. Whose gonna be the one to tell him about his father? Which one of us has the strength to sit down beside that small child and tell him that his father was killed like a dog?" The soldier beside Richard asked, his voice shaky.

The table was silent again, and something happened that I would remember for the rest of my life. I watched as the faces of all four men lost their spark; their emotions. Their uniqueness. Their very lives.

I had watched it happen.

Volare.

It was a simple word, but every soldier knew it. It was a word that's meaning meant so much, and proved that to soldiers, even the highest of all things can fall.

Volare was that one instance in time when the soul of a soldier is snuffed out, and dies. Not physical death, but emotional death. Mental death. It was that instant when the soldier realizes that he was no longer a man. No longer in control of his life and his choices. When he realizes that he was destined, at birth, to die on the battlefield.

Volare was the death of a person's spark. They become living tombstones, and live the rest of their presumed short lives as hollow shells of their past selves. They have no more sadness, and they have no more fear. Death does not frighten them, and they see it as a release from the tortures of life.

Volare was a curse, and I was close to it.

I'm not going to record here what my thoughts were when I had contemplated how close to Volare I actually was at that point in my life. I had to relive every painful memory and suffering I had gone through in my life, and I'm afraid that even thinking about it will bring back buried feelings.

* * *

><p>July 24, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ UNSC High Command Base: Easy-Able (HCB-EA), Spira.

I hated not being on the battlefield. You don't think about things when you're in the thick of battle, you don't have time to. Fighting keeps your mind busy and away from wandering thoughts and reality.

I needed to do something to keep my mind from thinking.

The firing range became my home away from home. I spent most of my time there, practicing on my accuracy while chatting with Hercules. Sometimes we would spend an entire day sparring, and I would often go to sleep at night bruised and aching. Soldiers would form a crowd around us as they watched us brawl, placing bets and cheering us on. It wasn't everyday that you got to see two Spartans fighting each other.

* * *

><p>I would visit Selene's grave everyday at sunset. The fiery light over the horizon would cascade over her beautiful tombstone, creating a soft glow around the stone.<p>

Standing on that small hill overlooking the horizon would always put me at ease. I felt at peace there, knowing that Selene's essence was still radiating around me.

* * *

><p>July 25, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ UNSC High Command Base: Easy-Able (HCB-EA), Spira.

The order came. I was shipping out tomorrow to rejoin the war.

I couldn't have been happier.

Unfortunately Hercules wasn't included in the mission, so he would be stuck at Easy-Able for a few more days. He didn't seem too sad about it, though. I guess he was the only one enjoying his break.

This was the mission I was waiting for; a chance to achieve my vengeance.

Hawke had given me the most important mission I would ever receive in my life:

UNSC Spec Ops 73284016

"***Sanctum***"

Honor-Leader will accompany Honor-Four to the Storm-Crest Province, where Covenant forces are believed to be excavating some type of artifact out of the ground. Intel has confirmed that the Covenant leader, Odin, has been spotted in the province. Spartans will be sent in to eliminate the Covenant commander at all costs.

Failure is not an option.

"_He who seeks vengeance must dig two graves: one for his enemy, and one for himself._"

Chapter Fifteen: Sanctum

July 27, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Storm-Crest Province, Spira. During the events of "Operation Sanctum."

Sanctum.

The name itself brings back bad memories.

It was the first mission Honor Team had ever failed.

And it was entirely my fault.

I went into that mission with one thing on my mind, and one emotion burning through my body like fiery blood.

Revenge, and anger.

This was it. This was my one chance to avenge Selene's death. I had been waiting for this opportunity for weeks.

Today was the day that I was going to shove my energy sword straight up Odin's ass.

Zeke was feeling the exact same way. He sat beside me silently, pulling back the bolt of his sniper rifle countless times; which was a clear indication that he was acting abnormal.

Zeke was as close to Selene as I was, and I knew he was beyond anxious for revenge.

He continued to snap back the bolt of his firearm, making sure that it wouldn't jam anytime soon.

There was no room for failure; of any kind.

Our Falcon soared silently through the fog of white, billowing clouds surrounding us. The view was breathtaking: the luscious green landscape below us was alight in an array of beautiful colors. Looming mountains rose from across the horizon, their peaks seeming to poke the fiery ball that floated in the sky.

"This is Echo 252 inbound to designated drop zone, ETA five minutes. Get ready back there!" our pilot shouted as he dropped the Falcon, causing us to descend slightly and lose altitude.

I glanced over at Zeke, who snapped his bolt forward one last time before letting out a sigh.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked him, staring into his golden visor.

"I've been ready." He answered coldly as he stood, grabbing onto the ceiling and gazing down at the land below us.

I stood as well, slinging my MA6D onto my back. I took a labored

breath, calming myself.

This was it.

Zeke grabbed the magazine under his rifle and pulled it out, tilting it slightly to show me the long, gold-colored bullets inside.

".50 Caliber Armor Piercing Incendiary rounds. Maximum range is 900 meters. These things are gonna hurt. A lot." Stated Zeke.

"Are you sure you're gonna be able to hit the target from that far away?" I asked him, immediately regretting asking the question. The answer was obvious.

"You just worry about staying out of my way when the time comes." He answered, turning away from me.

"Fair enough."

I didn't blame him for being on edge; we were both a little anxious.

"ETA one minute!" our pilot shouted, lowering the Falcon below the ocean of clouds and into the open air.

We were heading to a drop zone located in a massive field of wheat and grass, half a mile away from a large crevice between the bases of two, enormous mountains. Covenant frigates hovered in the airspace around the mountains, and heavy infantry patrolled the surrounding areas. An entire Covenant battalion was stationed around a giant crater in the center of the crevice, where large, Covenant machines continued to dig into the ground. The shrieks and roars from the machines filled the cold air, and could be heard over the howls of the wind.

The black Falcon dipped downwards, the wind slapping into its metal frame as it descended to the vast wheat field below. The stalks of wheat swayed and parted as we slowly dropped to the ground, the gusts of wind moving the wheat like a wave.

Zeke stepped out of the Falcon and landed in the field, the tall wheat reaching up to his waist.

I turned back towards the pilot, "we'll contact you when we're ready for evac."

"Take your time! I think I'm gonna snatch up some wheat and make myself some bread to eat while I wait! Ha ha ha!" joked the pilot, a grin on his face.

I didn't laugh.

The pilot's grin died almost instantly and his cheeks flushed red. "Uh, yeah, I'll be here when you get back, sir."

I gave him a nod and stepped out of the Falcon, walking towards the two mountains that loomed far in the distance as I followed Zeke.

"It's beautiful here." Zeke remarked as he waded through the sea of

wheat, catching me completely off-guard.

The risen sun shot brilliant rays of light across the wheat, and the cool breeze caused them to sway in waves slightly.

It was beautiful.

* * *

><p>It took us half an hour to cross the field of wheat, and another twenty minutes to walk through the hilly grasslands that followed.</p>

We trekked on in silence, the roars of the covenant drills getting louder as we came closer to the crevice. We were less than a mile away from the crevice, and I was beginning to get anxious. There was a fierce tension in the wind, and the energy sword at my waist seemed to burn through my armor.

Every step I took was a step closer to Odin, and to vengeance.

The ground began to slope downwards, and the green grass was slowly replaced by orange and red rocks. Boulders were scattered around, and our boots clattered against the gravel and mud below us. Cliffs and rock-faces came into view as we walked into the small canyons at the base of the two mountains, shadows playing against the stones.

"Come on." Called Zeke as he jumped onto a small ledge, following it upwards and disappearing behind a cluster of boulders. I followed the ledge with my eyes, realizing that it led deeper into the canyon; above the dirt path and towards the crevice.

I followed the black-armored Spartan and climbed onto the ledge, quickening my pace as I darted from boulder to boulder.

I caught up to him and he held out his fist, signaling me to stop.

We were crouched behind a high rock lodged into the mountain, overlooking the kilometers of rocky ground that made up the canyon. The ground sloped downwards again and out of sight two kilometers away, no doubt leading down into the crevice.

Two enormous mountains clouded the sky; one to our backs and one standing five hundred meters ahead of us, across the rocky path.

I quickly spotted the reason for Zeke's halt.

Covenant infantry patrolled the rocky paths below us; over a dozen squads of five grunts, two jackals, and an Elite Minor pacing through the rocks. Trying to move through the paths would be suicide; our armor would be melted into steaming piles of sludge in seconds.

Zeke lifted his head upwards, prompting me to do the same.

Banshees looped along the mountaintops and Phantoms soared through the air, the small aircraft dwarfs by the massive frigates looming overhead. The massive ships cast huge shadows into the canyon, blocking out the sun and creating a low dim of light.

"Any suggestions?" I asked to Zeke through the COMM.

"The best assassin is the one that remains unseen." Was his reply as he continued to stalk through the boulders, careful to stay in the shadows.

"No shit." I thought as I followed him, mimicking his movements.

We moved swiftly and silently, always clinging to the shadows. We would stop immediately and cling closely to the boulders as a Covenant patrol walked below us, their heads turning left and right as they scanned the area. I held my breath as they passed, completely unaware of our presence.

"Hey, uh, we got a slight problem," I heard a panicked voice say through my COMM, realizing that it was our pilot. "Banshees were beginning to fly dangerously close to the wheat fields, I had to take off or else risk them spotting me. I'll have to wait until things start to die down again before I can come back to pick the two of you up."

I cursed inwardly, "How long?"

"I don't know for sure, but I doubt it'll be anytime soon. I'll keep you posted, though. Hey, at least now you can enjoy some alone time with the split-chins, huh? Ha ha!" I heard the pilot say, laughing nervously.

I grew silent, tiring of his bad jokes.

"Uh, well, yeah. Standby." He finally said before cutting the connection, the embarrassment showing in his voice.

I looked at Zeke, who shook his head. "Damn pilots; they never know when to shut the hell up."

* * *

><p>We continued up the cliff-face, along the winding pass that clung to the side of the looming mountain and above the dirt paths.</p>

Our pace was slow and careful; one false move and the Covenant soldiers below us would be alerted to our presence.

Banshees and Phantoms would often bank downwards and soar through the canyon, forcing us to hide within the shadows of the rocks in order to stay concealed.

Zeke was phenomenal at staying undetected. He moved like a shadow; the black of his armor gracefully moving through the pass with unbelievable elegance and swiftness. He was chillingly silent, and his feet seemed to glide over the ground itself as he moved. He was like an ominous ghost; sneaking through the ethereal and melding with the sprawling shadows around him.

I followed the black-armored Spartan silently, trying my hardest to mimic his movements perfectly but failing.

We followed the pass for a quarter of a mile, where it expanded into a small cliff overlooking the crevice.

The small cliff was sloped upwards, creating an acute angle with the cliff-face behind us. There weren't any boulders or rocks along the cliff, meaning we had no cover to hide behind if a Banshee or Phantom came snooping around the cliff.

The massive crevice spanned across the landscape below us, with the two enormous mountains rising on both sides of it. The crevice was a massive, sunken crater located between the two mountains, with its circumference spanning over a mile wide. Boulders, rocks, and canyons were scattered around the edges of the large crater, while layers of mud and gravel made up the walls of the crater. The sun was blocked out by one of the looming mountains, creating a dim atmosphere and causing the temperature to drop to a cold chill.

Purple frigates drifted over the crater and around the canyons below the mountains, while Phantoms and banshees huddled around them. Shade turrets, Wraiths, and Ghosts were placed along the edges of the crater, while entire battalions of Covenant infantry set up camp around throughout the area. Giant, purple, machines were clustered inside and around the crater, roaring viciously as they drilled through the dirt and mud; sending towers of debris into the air. I could scarcely see a gigantic, gray, metallic spike sticking out of the center of the crater.

I stared at the large spike-like construct, noting that it was definitely of Forerunner design. Gizmo had told us all about the Forerunners and their creations; it was one of his favorite subjects to ramble on about. Questions began to swarm inside my brain, increasing my curiosity.

"That's a lot of Covenant soldiers down there: I lost count at around seven hundred." Whistled Zeke as he crouched beside me, grabbing his sniper rifle and placing it on the ground.

"What do you think it is that they're digging up?" I asked him, watching as he snapped down the bipod below his rifle and slid the barrel over the edge of the cliff. He dropped to lie on his stomach and scooted to the edge of the cliff, grabbing the rifle and placing the scope over his visor; his finger brushing against the trigger.

"Do you see the target?" I asked him as I lowered to my stomach as well, crawling to the edge to try and get a better view.

"Standby." He whispered as he scanned the crater.

I waited for what seemed like an hour, my anxiety and curiosity drilling holes in my heart.

Zeke let out a sigh and let go of the rifle, moving back to allow me to look through the scope.

"Over there: by the frigate." he said.

I eagerly crawled behind the rifle and grabbed it, removing my helmet and setting it beside me as I looked through the scope.

I slowly began to scan the crater through the Optics Scope, searching through the ranks of Grunts, Jackals, and Elites for our target. I

came upon a Frigate resting on the edge of the crater, its purple hull stretching for kilometers. Rows and rows of Covenant troops were standing in formation around the frigate, while four Honor Guards escorted a gold-armored Elite through the ranks.

My heart stopped as I spotted the gold-armored Elite, and a sword of fiery anger plunged through my soul. I watched Odin as he walked with pride through the soldiers, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Anger began to flare like a searing fire inside my gut as I stared at the Arbiter through the scope. Memories of Selene's lifeless eyes and limp body flashed through my mind with such ferocity that it sent chills down my spine, and a painful hatred clouded my judgment.

I watched silently as the Arbiter far below us stopped and turned to the ranks of the soldiers in his command, raising his hand and speaking words to them; no doubt comments to lift their spirits and morale. I loathed the damned creature: his very existence was an insult to Selene's memory.

I glanced down at the bottom left corner of my HUD, where my armor had calibrated with the rifle's reticle and displayed its current statistics:

Distance: 1.54 Miles

Bullet Drop: -563.8 IPY (Inches per Yard)

2478.3 meters was almost two miles: I wasn't very confident that I could fire with any amount of accuracy at that distance. Bullet drop would also be an issue; it meant I would have to aim carefully in order to make the shot.

I was never an ace at sniping; that was Zeke's area of expertise. I wasn't going to let Zeke take the shot though, Selene would have wanted me to avenge her; not him.

This was my kill, and I intended to collect. Here and now.

I grabbed the bolt of the rifle and snapped it back, hearing the sharp clang as a .50 caliber bullet was lifted into the chamber.

"Vanguard, what are you doing? You can't make that shot, its way too risky!" warned Zeke as he snapped his head towards me, his voice revealing his utter shock and surprise.

I ignored him and pushed the bolt forward again, my thoughts and conscious clouded by rage and bloodlust. If I had been thinking straight I would have realized how completely stupid I was being: there was no way in hell I would've been able to make that shot; not in a thousand years! But rage was a strong emotion: it clouded your judgment completely and took over your entire being.

I peered through the scope again and readied the shot, aiming carefully and placing the reticle a few yards above the Arbiter's head; to help compensate for the bullet drop.

The Arbiter was still addressing his army, his mouth opening and

closing as he spoke. I pitied him; he was unaware that in seconds his filthy brain matter would be covering the ground behind him.

"Vanguard, no!" Zeke shouted as he lunged at the rifle, his left hand outstretched. I quickly turned and kicked him in the chest, sending him tumbling back a few meters and into the cliff-face behind us.

I turned back to the rifle, holding my breath as I leveled the shot again. When I was confident with my aim I squeezed down on the trigger, feeling the rifle push violently into my chest as flames erupted from the tip.

I watched the yellow streak travel with intense speed through the air, arcing downwards and diving down towards the barren crater below. Time seemed to slow as I watched the bullet sink, the Covenant soldiers below turning their heads in alert as they heard the gunshot echo through the canyons.

A blade of horror plunged into my heart as I watched the yellow streak sink past Odin's head, missing by several feet. The Arbiter didn't even flinch as the bullet slammed into the ground behind him; his eyes turning to look up and find the source of the shot.

"GODDAMNIT!" I shouted in rage as I pulled back the bolt and fired again.

The second streak followed the path of the first, sinking downwards and shattering on the ground at Odin's feet.

"FUCK!" I roared as I once again pulled back the bolt, my mind controlled completely by rage and frustration.

CRACK!

Miss. The shot was off by several yards.

CLANG! The bolt shot backwards.

CRACK!

The bullet sank into the brain of a Grunt several yards away from Odin. The Arbiter found our position and stared up at me with cold, emotionless eyes; the ferocity and viciousness in his eyes sending chills up my spine.

CLANG!

CRACK!

Odin turned and walked slowly back towards the frigate, exchanging words with the commanders around him as he alerted the entire battalion to our position.

CLANG!

CRACK!

"VANGUARD!" Zeke shouted as he grabbed me by my back with both hands,

lifting me upwards and throwing me back into the cliff-face.

I stood, my eyes burning as I turned to him, "GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY WAY!"

"You need to calm the fuck down, Vanguard." Zeke warned, his golden visor staring at me.

"Shut the fuck up and stand down, Spartan! That's an order!" I spat back at him in fury.

"That's an order I can't obey. I'm not going to sit around while you drop into a psychotic rage and put my life in danger!" He replied, motionless.

"Disobeying a direct order from your commanding officer is punishable by death!" I warned him, anger coursing through my blood like fire.

"You're gonna kill me?" he asked, with a grim chuckle of disbelief.

"I will if I have to." I told him coldly.

"Then do it." he ordered, waving me forwards with his hands.

I growled and walked towards him, fiery rage emanating from my armor like heat. Zeke began to walk towards me as well, his fists clenched tightly.

I reached him and drew back my fist, sending it rushing towards his visor. Zeke drew back his fist and did the same, our fists coming mere inches away from connecting with their targets.

In an instant the entire cliff-face exploded, bright blue and white light spiraling outwards in all directions and sending us sprawling into the air. I shouted in pain as an intense heat washed over me, my shield flaring as chunks of debris and rock slammed into me.

I fell for what seemed like hours, my back finally slamming into the tough dirt below with a sickening smack. I lay there for minutes, my head swimming and dazed as blood began to run up my throat and seep from my lips. I coughed up blood and struggled to stand, my bones aching furiously.

I spotted Zeke a few meters away, crouching and holding his MA5B in his hands; the barrel ablaze. His sniper rifle lay in shattered pieces around him, smoke rising from the chunks.

I looked around, noticing the swarm of plasma charges, bolts, and mortars that rained through the canyons. I could hear the shouts of the Covenant soldiers over the roar of plasma fire as they charged from the crater towards us, firing blindly from half a mile away.

A patrol of six Grunts and three Jackals commanded by an Elite Minor appeared from behind a cluster of rocks to our right, hammering down on our position with fierce plasma fire.

"COVER FIRE!" I shouted over the roars, raising my MA6D and returning fire; standing as I began to back away.

Zeke obeyed my command and began to back away as well, forcing the Covenant patrol to take cover.

"GO! GO! GO!" I shouted to him as I pointed backwards, towards the wheat field miles away. He nodded and began to run, occasionally stopping to crouch and provide cover fire.

I followed Zeke frantically as we fled the canyons, with plasma rushing by us and the sounds of dozens of enemy soldiers close behind. My anger from earlier had completely vanished; replaced with an overwhelming chill of fear and dread.

"Echo 252 we need evac NOW!" I screamed into the COMM as I ran, air bursting out of my lungs and through my helmet.

"Uh, I don't know if I can make it there in one piece, sir! There are still banshees in the area and it looks like you've alerted the whole Covenant army!" I heard our pilot mutter, his voice uneasy.

"JUST DO IT!" I shouted at him, beyond frustrated with the pilot.

"Ok, ok, I'll try. I'll pick you up in the wheat field." He quickly replied, his voice shaky. I cut the connection.

Banshees passed overhead and fired volleys of plasma fire down on us, and I rolled to the side to avoid being struck by one. The ground exploded in light as the volleys hit, causing me to curse loudly as I quickly stood again.

I turned and began to sprint after Zeke, the ground erupting into craters of smoldering dirt and debris as the world around me was burned by plasma fire.

A large shadow covered me and I looked up to find the source, spotting a Phantom dropship as it hovered above us.

I ducked and covered my head with my free hand as the Phantom fired on me, sending large globs of plasma rushing down on me like acid rain. I continued to race forward, towards the grassy acres half a mile ahead of us; with Zeke a few feet ahead of me.

We were almost out of the canyon!

The Phantom stopped firing and entered into a burst of speed, soaring above us and drifting to a stop at the exit of the canyon. It hovered there for a few moments, before a large figure leaped from its bowels and dropped onto the dirt ground below, kicking up a cloud of dust and dirt. The Phantom ascended and flew off, leaving us bewildered and surprised as we stared cautiously at the lone figure ahead of us; blocking our escape.

The dust cloud cleared to reveal a lone Elite, standing defiantly as he stared at us.

The Elite was at least seven feet tall, with a rather scrawny build and long legs. His skin was black as night, with red tattoos scrawled across his flesh. He wore a set of white ranger armor and a matching helmet, his arms and shoulders naked and without armor pieces

attached. A magnificent black cape was belted by golden rings around his chest and flowed down his back; ornate gold patterns knitted into the silky fabric. His visor was shining gold, matching the brilliance of his cape.

A long, black, metal sword was held in the Sangheili's right hand. The hilt of the sword was long and leather-bound, attaching to a blackened cross guard shaped like a "V." The blade itself was six feet long and extremely dull, with a pointed tip at the top. The sword looked like an antique, and unable to cut the heads of wheat from their stalks.

"What the fuckâ€œ!" muttered Zeke as he stared at the Elite, dumbstruck.

The Sangheili turned to us, his golden visor examining the two Spartans ahead of him.

After a few moments the Sangheili raised his sword and pointed the tip towards me. "The hunt has begun, and the Divines have chosen you as my prey. If you have any last words speak them now, before the edge of my blade cuts open your throat and sends you to the planes of oblivion." The Elite's voice was like rocks screeching against each other: bone chilling, fierce, confident, and noble.

"Who are you?" I asked the Sangheili, raising my rifle. Pretty epic last words, huh?

"I am known by my kind as Auron Yggdrasil; Blade of the Howling Wind and warrior of the Forsworn, Lord Odin's Elite Honor Guard. My blade has drank the blood of thousands of your kind, and yet it is still unquenched. Come; let us see if your blood can sate my blade!"

Auron's sword flashed in a spear of blue light as hazel energy surrounded the blade, creating a layer of electric energy half-a-foot thick around the blade. Blue sparks crackled and surged across the blade, and the blue energy seemed to heat the very air itself.

"Oh shi—" I started, but I couldn't finish my curse.

Auron was upon me in an instant, with speed unlike anything I've ever seen before.

I barely had time to dive to the side as he swung his sword towards my chest, the blue energy missing by mere inches and slicing across the dirt ground. I rolled away as the energy surged forward and created a long, smoldering trench in the dirt, the blue shockwave causing the wind to scream.

Panicking and fearing for my life I rolled again, hearing the hiss of the wind as Auron brought his blade down again, impaling it into the ground near my head.

I heard the sound of gunfire as Zeke fired at Auron. The Elite turned and leaped into the air, easily ascending ten feet into the air as he dropped towards Zeke.

I stood and placed the rifle on my back; it would be useless against an enemy as fast as this. I grabbed the energy sword from my side and

activated it, feeling the intense heat emanate from the weapon.

I took a split second to look back down the canyon, hearing the Covenant soldiers as they ran towards us, still firing blindly. I couldn't see them over the rocky terrain, but I knew they were getting close. They would reach us in minutes.

I turned back to the fight, chills racing up my spine as I spotted Zeke backing away from the Sangheili. The black-armored Spartan was ducking, side stepping, and lurching his body in every direction to avoid the lightning fast swings and thrusts from the Elite. I was amazed at how well Zeke was able to dodge the Elite, but I knew he would tire soon.

I growled and sprinted towards the fray, energy sword swinging by my side.

"Zeke, tag out!" I shouted as I reached the two warriors, running towards Zeke's back.

With a grunt Zeke jumped into the air and allowed me to sprint under his feet, swinging my sword towards Auron as my comrade landed on his feet behind me.

Auron easily blocked my swing and launched a counterattack, forcing me to deflect the attack with the flat of my sword. Auron pressed on, sending blow after blow at me as I struggled fiercely to keep them from connecting.

"You are slow and clumsy, human. I'm surprised you were able to survive your encounter with Odin." taunted Auron as he swung at my head, forcing me to duck quickly.

"I'm just getting started!" I shouted as I activated the MVES system in my armor, cranking it up to 80% and feeling the tremendous amounts of energy pour through my blood and muscles. Steam rose from my armor as I launched my own counterattack and pressed towards the Elite, my hand moving wildly and swiftly. He was still able to deflect my attacks, but the Nanomachines had increased my speed, allowing me to keep up with his movements.

Auron jabbed for my ribs and I swatted his hefty sword to the side, roaring as I lunged towards him and sent a fist towards his helmet. He easily ducked under my swing and slammed his elbow into mine, causing me to grunt in pain. He secured his footing and bashed his shoulder into my chest, knocking the wind out of my lungs and sending me sprawling to the ground.

Zeke was upon him the second I hit the ground, evading his attacks and trying his hardest to punch, kick, or head-but the Sangheili.

Auron found an opening and kicked Zeke in the helmet, knocking his head backwards as he lost his balance. Zeke's head tilted backwards, leaving his neck exposed to the Sangheili warrior.

"May the Divines judge your soul." Auron declared as he swung towards Zeke's neck.

"NO!" I shouted as I lunged towards the Sangheili, completely

disregarding my own safety.

I had already lost a sister to these bastards, and I wasn't about to lose a brother too.

I reached Zeke just in time, placing my body in front of his as I swung my sword and deflected the deadly attack; electric sparks dancing off our blades.

"Tag out!" I ducked and felt one of Zeke's boots dig into my back as he lunged over me, towards Auron.

Then, a miracle happened.

Zeke roared in defiance as he punched the Elite in the face with all his strength, a thunderous crack echoing through the canyon as his fist connected with metal.

Auron was sent crashing into the ground a few yards away, his sword sizzling as it cut through the dirt.

"Let's go!" Zeke shouted as he turned and fled, back towards the wheat field and our evac.

I followed, dropping into a sprint as I followed my comrade; unwilling to look back and see if Auron was following.

We weren't running like cowards; far from it. We loved a challenge, and Auron was as great a challenge as Odin himself! Every bone in my body was telling me to turn around and clash swords with him again, but I knew better than that.

We knew when we were outmatched.

I panted heavily as we raced through the grass fields at 30 miles-per-hour. The constant barrage of plasma fire had stopped, and it was as if the Covenant were allowing us to escape.

That made me nervous.

I looked over at Zeke, noticing a large gash on the left side of his armor, under his armpit. The armor had been ripped open, and blood was dripping freely from the wound. The Spartan showed no sign of pain or weakness, but I knew the wound was hurting him.

We had fucked up; no, I had fucked up. I had let my emotions get the better of me, and it cost us the entire mission; and almost our lives. I would apologize to Zeke and reconcile with my closest comrade, hoping that he would understand and forgive me.

After ten minutes of constant sprinting we reached the wheat field, spotting our pilot's black Falcon hovering over the plants.

"Hurry!" the pilot warned as he waved us on, spotting over a dozen Banshees racing towards us in the distance.

Zeke leaped onto the Falcon and I jumped after him, grabbing onto the ceiling and stepping into the aircraft.

Echo 252 hit some switches and got us in the air again, turning the

aircraft around and lurching us forward in a burst of speed.

After a while the two mountains guarding the crater site were nothing but shadows over the horizon.

I leaned back in my seat and wrenched off my helmet, letting it fall to the ground. I rustled my hands through my sweaty hair and turned to look at Zeke, who was busy activating his COMM; his hand grabbing his wound.

"Command, this is Honor-Four. We've got a problem."

22. II: The Divide

Chapter Sixteen: The Divide

July 30, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Storm-Crest Province, Spira.

Operation Arrowhead: A major UNSC Operation that called upon 1/3rd of the UNSC fleet stationed on Spira to participate. Arrowhead was a direct offensive assault against the Covenant fleet occupying the crevice and the excavation site, using a combined force of infantry and air support to siege the area and crush all Covenant resistance. If everything went according to plan then we would win a crucial victory over the Covenant Fleet, and stop Odin from uncovering and activating the Forerunner artifact in the crater. Making Operation Arrowhead a success would be no small task, but the best of the best were being sent into the fray, and Fleet Admiral Hawke was confident we would be victorious.

Fleet Admiral Hawke had finally rejoined Honor Team and sent us at the head of the offensive, to "lead and assist" the marines in their assault. Six Companies made up Arrowhead's main attack force:

There was Nova Delta, a Company we had helped in their campaign to reclaim Haven. Deseron was in charge of the entire Company, keeping his promotion as Brigadier General, with Malone serving as his Colonel. Akiba and Nicolai weren't participating in this Operation, which lowered my spirits. Delta had received replacements after their success in Haven, and were now five hundred men strong.

Next was the 33rd ODST Recon Division, a squad of twenty five ODSTS led by Colonel Zachary. Zachary was a cold, stern leader, his love for alcohol fueling him to survive the battles on Earth and the Ark.

Then there was Nova Charlie, a company of two hundred infantrymen led by a General Rogers; a battle-hardened Veteran who had lost his right arm in a brawl with an Elite on Reach. He had received a robotic prosthetic shortly after, effectively giving him the nickname "Armstrong." It was pretty dark humor, but hey; war is war.

The 109th Expeditionary was back in action and following at our side, their large Vektor tanks storming through the fields. They had a new Brigadier General, a man whose name I didn't manage to catch before the Operation. I had heard from Gizmo that Fox Patrol Team came along with them, but I had yet to confirm it.

The 64th Recon had come along for the ride, composed of over thirty Falcons and Pelican dropships. They would come in handy, no doubt about it. They were led by a cocky, steadfast Captain named Franz Castillo. He was extremely annoying, and it took every ounce of my being not to crush his head with my fist.

The last Company participating was the 13th Halcyon Calvary; a "squad" of two frigates supported by a Destroyer-class battleship. The UNSC *Kraken*, the *Radiant Glory*, and the *Cestus* would provide crucial air support for our army.

There were over a thousand soldiers heading to battle along with us, their spirits soaring as they waited anxiously for the coming fight. The Covenant were no doubt preparing for our arrival; willing to do everything in their power to keep us from taking the crater.

This was going to be the biggest and most important battle to take place on Spira so far, and we all knew it.

We were more than ready.

* * *

><p>I sighed softly and leaned back in my seat; my eyes closed as I felt the gentle vibrating of the pelican and heard the constant hum of the engine. A BR55 rested on my lap, and my MA6D was strapped to my back.</p>

I turned my head to look out of the back of the pelican: a massive sea of golden-brown wheat swaying like waves flowing below the aircraft. Dozens of other pelicans and falcons soared through the morning air behind ours.

The morning sun was peering over the horizon, casting fierce, red light across the cloudless sky. The cool breeze of dawn filled the pelican and seeped into my helmet, pleasuring my lungs with delicious fresh air as I breathed softly.

Hundreds of UNSC marines strode through the ripples of wheat, accompanied by dozens of Warthogs, Scorpions, and Vektors as they headed for the grass fields a mile ahead; where the frontlines of the Covenant fleet stood in wait.

Even from this distance I could see the glistening horde of alien soldiers through our pelican's windshield; glancing at the Wraiths and Ghosts that looked half their size from this distance.

The *Kraken*, the *Cestus*, and the *Radiant Glory* drifted miles above the swarm of pelicans and falcons, waiting for the bulk of the fleet to push into the canyon before joining the fray as cavalry.

"It sucks being back here so soonâ€|" spoke up Zeke from the seat beside me, watching the troops move below our aircraft.

"The view is so breathtaking and beautiful! How fascinating!" exclaimed Gizmo as he stood and walked to the edge of the pelican, dropping to sit with his legs dangling below him in the open, fresh air.

He was right; the view was breathtaking.

I looked ahead and through the windshield again, staring at the dark, ominous mountains miles ahead and the shadowed canyons beyond.

I began to wonder if we would encounter that Sangheili swordsman again.

I shuddered slightly and a chill raced up my spine as I recalled our brawl with the menace.

Hercules continued to snore loudly beside me, his head leaned back and the tip of his helmet touching the ceiling. He had fallen asleep the instant we had entered the pelican, filling the air with his heavy breathing. He wasn't a morning person.

"Oi! Wake up, you dumb troll!" Zeke shouted as he raised his new SRS99D-S2 AM Rifle, poking the red-armored giant with the barrel.

Hercules didn't budge, and his snoring seemed to get louder.

Zeke growled and stood, glaring at the sleeping Spartan.

"Let him be," I warned him, making no effort to stop him. "You don't want to wake the beast."

Zeke lifted his foot and kicked Hercules hard, his armored boot slamming into the Spartan's helmet.

Hercules woke, oddly calm as he stretched and yawned loudly; as if unaware that Zeke had kicked the shit out of him.

Zeke sighed, turning and taking his seat again. "Dumbass."

I chuckled, glancing over at Hercules and patting him on the armored shoulder. "Good morning."

* * *

><p>Our pelican dropped into the wheat field and landed beside the UNSC frontline soldiers, who were eagerly making their way towards the grass field kilometers ahead. The ranks of the Covenant resistance waiting for them in the fields were getting closer and closer, and the beginning of the fierce battle was close at hand.</p>

We stood and collected our weapons; Hercules hefted his newly acquired Spartan Laser. We jumped out of the aircraft and onto the soft surface of wheat, waving back at our pelican as it ascended and flew back towards the rear.

We turned and joined the ranks of the frontlines as they waded through the blanket of stalks and golden-brown buds, their eyes watching us with joy, excitement, surprise, and fear.

I swept my feet through the sea of plants, looking back to stare in awe at the hundreds of troops and vehicles following behind us; pelicans and falcons drifting overhead. Far off in the distance were the three frigates; black silhouettes in the morning sun.

It was a marvelous sight to see.

"'A feast for crows in the bleeding sun of dawn.'" Zeke recited the proverb as he shouldered his rifle, his visor pointed upwards as he gazed at the horizon.

"There may be too many bodies for even the crows to devourâ€|" commented Hercules as he waded through the wheat, nodding at the marines that passed him.

"Come to think of it: have you guys ever seen a crow on Spira yet?" Gizmo asked us, turning quickly.

I thought about it.

"No, I haven't. I haven't seen any kind of birds at all, now that I think about it." I replied, in disbelief.

"Me either." Zeke added.

"I haven't seen a single animal in the month that we've been here." I realized aloud.

"That's because there are none on Spira." Gizmo murmured as he quickened his pace and looked down at his Datapad.

"What a strange planetâ€|" Zeke sighed as he walked, marines around him ducking as they tried to avoid being smacked in the face by the barrel of his rifle.

A Warthog shuffled past me, the marine on the LAAG giving me a wave and a smile. Soldiers walked on both sides of the vehicle, peering across the fields.

"SPARTANS! IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME! HA HA HA!" I heard a familiar voice shout across the field. I turned, grinning at my old friend.

Brigadier General James Deseron laughed loudly as he strode up to me and gave me a firm handshake, a wide grin on his bearded face.

"Deseron! I didn't expect to see you on the frontlines!" I said to him, removing my helmet so he could see my smile.

Deseron wore standard UNSC battle armor, and you could have easily mistaken him as just another marine. He wore no helmet, and a MA5B rested on his shoulder; a BR55 strapped to his back. The insignia of a Brigadier General was painted onto his shoulder plates, and a newly acquired Bowie Knife was sheathed across his chest.

"I could say the same for you! But then again, you're always assigned to the frontlines." Deseron replied.

He was right; Honor was always being sent to the frontlines. I would have to complain to Hawke about that later.

"Hawke agreed to let one of his Brigadier General's lead his armies from the frontlines?" I asked Deseron, curious.

"The Fleet Admiral agreed to let me lead his armies; he said nothing about leading from the frontlines. Hawke's leash on me is not as tight as you think, my friend!" Deseron answered, his grin growing wider.

"So it seems." I nodded.

"So we meet again on the battlefield, Deseron." Spoke Hercules as he shook the General's hand firmly. Deseron winced in pain, his hand being crushed under Hercules' grip.

"I'm looking forward to fighting with you by my side again, Spartan." Deseron replied, flexing his hand.

The Brigadier General turned to Gizmo, shaking his hand as well and sharing greetings.

He turned to Zeke last, who only stared at his open palm before huffing and turning back around.

"Was it something I said?" Deseron asked as he turned back to me, his eyes showing his confusion.

"No." I sighed, rustling my armored hand through my hair. "Zeke's not a huge fan of sharing pleasantries."

"Brigadier General! We're about to make contact with the Covenant!" a marine shouted as he ran towards us, panic in his eyes.

I quickly looked up, realizing that we were less than a kilometer away from reaching the grass field; and the Covenant soldiers that stood beyond.

Deseron's demeanor instantly changed as he walked towards the soldier, "tell the men to form phalanxes and spread out. We'll need to punch holes through the Covenant forces and allow the bulk of our infantry to push through. I want at least two Warthogs between each phalanx, and Scorpion tanks supporting them. Spread the word down the frontlines." Deseron ordered.

The soldier saluted and ran off.

Deseron climbed onto a passing warthog and slid into the driver's seat; the previous driver moving over into the passenger's seat. "I wish I could stay and fight with you, my friends, but I am needed elsewhere. We'll meet up after we've passed through the field. Good luck, Spartans."

"We don't need luck! We're Spartans!" Zeke shouted at him.

"We'll see you soon, Deseron. Be safe." I told him, watching as he nodded and drove off; down the frontline.

"Honor! On me!" I shouted to my team.

They nodded in unison and raised their weapons, Hercules and Gizmo moving to cover my left and right flank as Zeke remained where he was; adjusting the scope on his rifle.

I raised my own rifle; the MA6D gripped tightly in my armored hands.

Claire stared at us in awe; her mouth agape and eyes wide in fascination.

"Fifty thousand." Zeke blurted out, no doubt grinning behind his helmet.

* * *

><p>"Watch out!" I shouted as I grabbed a nearby marine and threw her to the ground, covering her body with my armor as a plasma mortar exploded a few feet away from us. The ground splintered and sent a cloud of fire and debris into the air, an intense heat causing the air to sizzle loudly.</p>

"Cover fire!" I shouted to my team as I rose to a crouch, turning back towards the scores of Covenant soldiers moving slowly towards our frontlines; half a kilometer of luscious grass separating the two armies.

Hercules and Gizmo were beside me instantly; Gizmo's MA6D roaring and shaking while Hercules' Spartan Laser rocked back as it sent beams of red energy into Ghosts racing towards us.

Zeke grabbed the stunned marine by the arm and helped her up, placing her MA5B back in her hand.

"T-thanks." She murmured, quickly lowering her head as the sound of fierce battle frightened her. There was bits of grass and dirt in her long, blond hair, and her hazel eyes were filled with fear.

The battle had started the instant we set foot on the grass fields. The air itself was thrust into a shade of deep violet and blue as plasma shots and charges raced towards our frontlines; splashing onto our soldiers and killing many within seconds. We had fired back in retaliation; our weapons making a deafening crescendo of roars as they sent flaming bullets towards the enemy.

Warthogs raced through the lines to clash with enemy Ghosts, while Scorpion and Vektor tanks hung back to bombard the Covenant forces with tungsten shells.

Falcons and Pelicans flew overhead, engaging in fierce dogfights with Banshees and Phantoms as the blue sky was dotted with explosions and fire.

"Go back to the rear of the charge! We'll handle the frontlines!" I told the marine as I turned to her, plasma shots whizzing past my helmet.

I would've hated to turn and find her corpse mangled and burned, lying in the grass.

She looked at me for a few moments, her beautiful, violet eyes pouring her feelings of dread and trust out.

"Okay." She finally said as she stood and grabbed her rifle, turning and running back into the mass of soldiers behind us.

I turned back to the battle, ducking my head as a warthog nearby was ripped apart by a fiery explosion of plasma; the metal shrieking and shattering as smoldering corpses fell to the ground.

Our frontlines continued to slowly move forward, a chorus of rifles booming as they went. Plasma scattered across the air as we went, and mortars bombarded the ground around us with pillars of plasma fire.

"Zeke, target the Elite commanders! Hercules, take out the Ghosts and Wraiths! Gizmo, with me!" I ordered my team over the roar of battle, my boots stepping over bodies and landing in pools of blood.

They moved into position almost instantly; Hercules dropping to one knee and raising his Spartan Laser while Zeke lowered to lie on the ground beside him; his sniper rifle propped up on its bipod and the scope pressed to his visor.

Gizmo moved beside me, his rifle raised and alight.

We laid down cover fire, trying our hardest to avoid the plasma fire being rained down on us. Soldiers around us shouted, cried, and cursed as they were hit by the plasma, some even being sent airborne when plasma mortars hit the ground near them.

A Ghost raced towards me from across the fields, its cannons ablaze and sending purple blobs towards me.

Gizmo quickly ran in front of me and activated his Armor Lock, slamming his fist down on the hood of the vehicle and creating a large dent in the metal.

The Ghost was knocked into the air by the force of his punch, flipping wildly in the air as fires erupted through it. The Grunt pilot screamed as he fell to the ground, before being run over by a passing Warthog; his head being splattered across the grass.

"Thanks." I told my teammate as he deactivated his Lock, giving me a slight nod.

Another Ghost raced towards us, but it was quickly consumed in a fiery explosion as Hercules sent a molten red beam of energy into its hood. It exploded and flailed around on the ground, killing a grunt running alongside it.

Zeke's rifle rocked back and forth as he fired at distant enemies, beheading Elite Minors and Majors as his rifle boomed. He would occasionally let the empty magazine drop to the grass and remove a new one from his belt, slapping it into his rifle.

I switched to my BR55 and peered through the scope, sending a burst of fire into the chest of an Elite crouched a few yards ahead of me. I fired at the three Grunts under his command, killing them all with well aimed headshots.

I switched targets and fired at an Elite Major barking orders at his troops, causing his shields to flare brightly. The Major growled at me and charged, his plasma rifle shaking as he hammered down my

position with fire.

I continued to fire on the Major, his shields continuing to protect him.

The Elite Major head exploded in a mist of brain, blood, and skin; its headless body dropping to the ground in a heap. Behind me, Zeke reloaded his rifle and scanned the battlefield for more prey.

Suddenly a series of ear-splitting shrieks bellowed through the sky as a squadron of Longswords streaked overhead, dropping a volley of bombs on the Covenant frontlines. A massive wall of searing fire, smoke, and debris rose across the line, creating loud booms and smoking craters in the grass.

A window of opportunity!

"CHARGE!" I shouted as I sprinted towards the explosions, content on catching the Covies off-guard. If we could smash into their forces while they were still recovering from the bombardment, we'd be more than able to pummel our way through the fields.

Around me, dozens of soldiers carried my message to their comrades as they followed me eagerly, shouts leaving their mouths as they ran. Pretty soon the entire UNSC fleet was charging towards the fields, Warthogs and Scorpions racing by them to join the fray.

Gizmo and Hercules were close behind me, no doubt eager to kick some ass. Zeke was nowhere to be seen, and I had no clue where he might've gone. Maybe it was a good thing that he was by himself; he always liked being the Lone Wolf.

As one we leaped over the dirt craters and clashed into the Covenant frontlines in a haze of fire, explosions, plasma, and battle cries. There was chaos throughout the grass fields as the two forces collided, with Warthogs and Ghosts crashing into each other. Phantoms and Banshees engaged in deadly dogfights with our Pelicans and Falcons, the air alit with heavy fire.

With a defiant war cry I landed on the chest of a Jackal and caved in his ribcage, using my left boot to curb stomp its face into bloody goo.

I brandished my energy sword in my left hand and held onto the Battle Rifle with my right, the sword flashing a bright blue as I ripped apart the bodies of Grunts and blew holes into the skulls of Jackals.

A horizontal swing removed a Grunts head from its neck as I whirled around, kicking a Jackal skirmisher beside me to the ground. I pointed the BR at the alien's skull, feeling the rifle kick as it sent three rounds deep into the jackal's tiny brain.

A suicide Grunt cried as it ran towards me, twin plasma grenades activated in its hands. I sliced open the belly of an Elite Minor behind me before turning back around to kick the Grunt in the chest, watching as the small alien was hurled backwards and into a passing ghost; its blood filling the air as the vehicle slammed into it. The plasma grenades hung in the air for a few moments before detonating,

engulfing the ghost, its driver, and the three other grunts around it in heated plasma.

I moved on, my left arm a blur as I cut my way through dozens of Grunts and Jackals, my heart rate quickening slightly every time an Elite Minor or Major would rise to challenge me.

"Van! Wraith!" I heard Gizmo say from behind me, his MA6D roaring as he covered my flank. He looked up at me and pointed ahead, towards the purple, towering tank that was slowly making its way towards me through the Covenant horde.

Shit!

"Come on!" Hercules bellowed as he ran past me, his boots thumping loudly on the grass as he went.

I followed my comrade, sprinting beside him as I strapped the BR back onto my back and held the energy sword at my side.

The Wraith tank lobbed a large plasma mortar down at us, forcing us to jump to the side as the projectile exploded on the grass and formed a large dome of plasma and searing light.

I activated the MVES system and cranked it up to 60%, leaping at least twenty feet into the air and landing with a metallic thud on the top of the Wraith.

"GRAAH!" I shouted as I raised my energy sword and plunged it into the front of the Wraith, feeling the blade melt through the metal, cutting into the cockpit below and digging into the skull of the Elite driver. Smoke began to rise from the holes in the metal as I brought the sword back up, hearing it sizzle as it melted the purple alloy.

"Move!" Hercules shouted as he reached the Wraith, grabbing onto the bottom of it with both hands.

I jumped off of the tank, landing back on the ground.

Hercules roared loudly as he began to lift the Wraith, his armored hands creating dents in the metal as he raised the front of the tank upwards. With an even louder shout he spun around, swinging the massive tank in the air before releasing it into the air; roaring loudly as he sent the Wraith hurtling through the grass fields, crushing, splattering, and slamming through any Covenant soldiers in its path. The Wraith slid to a stop twenty meters away, a trail of multi-colored blood left in its wake.

Hercules dropped to one knee and pressed his hands on the ground, breathing heavily as he struggled to regain his strength.

The fighting around us had stopped the instant the red-armored Spartan had lifted the tank, Covenant and UNSC soldiers alike turning to stare in awe at his amazing feat; mouths agape.

Marines took the momentary lull in combat to take the initiative, slaughtering the Covie infantry around them with rifles and combat knives. Seconds later the world was thrust into battle again; plasma and bullets filling the air.

I was about to rejoin the fray, energy sword in hand, when something stopped me. I halted, standing complete still as I tried to figure out what was wrong.

I looked around, feeling a strange cold-chill course through my body. The hairs on my arms and neck began to stand on end, and I could feel an ominous aura in the air.

Something was coming. Something strange. Something malevolent.

Frames of time: A nanosecond long. At least five frames within one heart beat. One heart beat before action.

The wind!

The presence!

Above!

Reflex!

Reaction!

Ba-boom!

My body acted before my brain, moving my legs and causing me to jump backwards. A white figure collided with the ground where I was standing a nanosecond ago, a flash of blue light consuming the grass.

A blaze of blinding light filled my vision as I landing on the ground a meter away, shielding my face from the intense heat and light from the figure.

The ground around the white flash had been melted away, forming a large, blackened, smoking crater; the gravel below still red with heat.

Holy shit! I thought as I caught my breath, my heart racing intensely as I realized I was nanoseconds away from death.

The increased reaction time from the MVES had saved my life!

"Either you've gotten faster or I've gotten slower; and I highly doubt it's the latter. Still, this is veryâ€¦bothersome." A familiar, ominous voice said, originating from the white figure that had almost killed me seconds ago.

Auron stood at the center of the crater, his cape flowing like an ocean in the wind and his massive sword alit with magnificent blue light.

"Oh shitâ€|" I cursed as I stared at the Forsworn, gripping my energy sword tightly and preparing for the fight of my life.

I'm gonna be completely honest right now:

I was beyond scared. I was fucking terrified!

Come on: if you were standing in front of a legendary Sangheili warrior wielding an energy sword the size of Nebraska and looking at you with a look that said "I'm gonna fuck you right in the asshole," you'd be scared shitless too!

I was going to die.

Better go out with a bang, right?

"I will ask again, demon: do you have any last words?" Auron asked, completely ignoring the roar of battle around him.

"Yeah; how the fuck do you split-chins eat with that huge ass hole in the bottom of your mouths? I'd imagine that everything would just drop straight out of your lips and splatter on your pretty little alien whitey tighties!" I spat at him, grinning beneath my helmet.

Vanguard: 1

Auron: 0

"A fool till the end." Auron said, shaking his head. "Come, demon, time to greet death!"

I tensed.

Here we go!

Like a blur Auron had moved, he sword becoming a blue streak of light as he reached me instantly.

I attempted to raise my sword arm to block, but it was too late! I was too slow!

Gizmo appeared out of nowhere and punched the Sangheili in the face, his armor encased in blue aura from his Armor Lock.

Auron backed off, glaring in surprise at Gizmo.

"That was close!" Gizmo sighed as he turned to me, his armor emitting a fierce blue aura that heated the air around him.

The green-armored Spartan dropped into a defensive stance, the Armor Lock around him sending large blue sparks into the air. "So this is Auron?"

"Uh, yeahâ€|Gizmoâ€|how are you moving?" I asked him, in disbelief. I didn't think it was possible for anyone to move while their Armor Lock was engaged.

"You mean with the Armor Lock activated? It was simple to figure out! I mean, I've had over nine years to experiment and upgrade my armor! Maybe I could upgrade yours too sometime!" Gizmo exclaimed, standing and flexing his arm muscles, sparks jumping from his armor.

"Upgrade?" I wondered out loud.

"Enough talk!" Auron growled, swinging back his blade as he prepared to charge us. We dropped into defensive stances.

"Here he comes!" I warned as I spotted the Sangheili lift his left foot.

He charged us with amazing speed; a trail of grass and dirt erupting behind him.

A red figure jumped between me and the Sangheili, slamming its huge shoulder into the Elite and sending it hurtling to the ground a few yards away. Auron caught himself in mid fall and flipped back to his feet, growling as he faced us again.

"Am I too late to join the party?" Hercules said as he stood in front of me, cracking his knuckles and facing the Sangheili.

"You're never too late, my friend. Did you bring any pound cake?" I asked him, grinning as my spirits were lifted.

"Nope; but I did bring the punch!" he growled, tightening his fists.

"Three demons? Howâ€¢bothersome." Auron sighed as he glanced at us.

Suddenly the Elite jumped twenty feet into the air, revealing a Wraith tank directly behind him; its cannon rocking backwards as it fired a plasma mortar at us.

Gizmo, Hercules, and me all jumped in unison to avoid the mortar, separating from each other as we landed.

My feet hit the ground, and I looked up quickly to find Auron inches away from me, his blade arcing down towards my head.

Cursing I brought up my sword, seeing the sparks fly as our swords met in midair.

Auron spun like a top and pressed with amazing speed and strength, his blade a complete blur as I struggled to deflect his swings with my own.

Gizmo shot towards us, his Armor Lock active as he attempted to smash both of his fists into the Sangheili's head.

Auron cursed as he glanced back at Gizmo and lunged to the left, barely avoiding the green-armored Spartan as his fists slammed into the ground like boulders.

Hercules quickly joined the fray, shouting a battle cry as he barreled his fist down towards Auron.

Auron dodged again, leaping into the air as Hercules' fist created a large crater in the ground; a thunderous boom and quake shaking the grass field as a cloud of dust rose from the crater.

I pushed off of my feet as leaped towards the Sangheili, cranking the MVES up to 75%. I had to be careful; the more I used the MVES, the more of my life energy would be drained out of me.

I reached the Sangheili in midair, our weapons clashing in a rage of sparks and clangs as we moved with unbelievable speed. I growled I tried to break his guard, and create any kind of opening to go in for the killing blow. Auron met every one of my attacks, evading my attempts to break his guard.

I clenched my teeth as my sword-hand began to tire, fatigue creeping into my body as the MVES began to wear off. Suddenly it seemed like Auron was getting faster and I was getting slower, and it was beginning to get harder and harder to deflect his attacks.

I quickly backed off of the Sangheili and landed back on the ground, catching my breath as I watched him do the same.

Hercules and Gizmo walked to my side, their visors pointed towards the white-armored Sangheili.

"Hmâ€|I may have underestimated your abilities, demon. Eliminating you while you are aided by your allies makes things ratherâ€|bothersome." Auron said as he stared at me; eyes like dark pits of raging fire.

Around us, the battle had tipped towards the UNSCs favor. We had successfully pushed into the fields, and shattered the Covenant's frontlines; forcing their army to retreat back towards the canyon. Distant gunfire and explosions rocked the air as our forces swept up the rest of the Covenant forces too stupid to fight instead of run.

I quickly grabbed my BR55 and aimed it at the Sangheili, while Gizmo raised his MA6D and Hercules hefted his Spartan Laser.

"Hm...This is gettingâ€|troublesome. We'll have to continue our duel another time, demon. Until then-" Auron jumped, his cape billowing below him as he ascended thirty feet straight into the air. He dropped down to stand on the roof of a passing Phantom, before disappearing in the distance as the purple dropship raced towards the canyons.

Gizmo, Hercules and I stood in silence, catching our breath as we tried to comprehend what had just happened.

"Vanguard! VANGUARD!" I heard Deseron shout from behind us.

I turned, spotting my old friend as he ran towards us, something tucked in his hands.

Something was wrong.

Deseron reached me and shoved the object into my hands.

I looked down at it, and gasped in terror.

This couldn't be!

It wasn't!

Not again!

There, held loosely in my hands, was a black, Mark VI helmet; fresh blood seeping down from the golden visor and from inside the hollow frame.

"He's missing." Was all Deseron could manage to say.

H:V

23. II: Grimoire of Darkness

Halo: Vanguard

**Semi-Finale
>

* * *

><p>"*Darkness is only driven out by light, not more darkness.*"
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* * *

><p>Chapter Seventeen: Grimoire of Darkness

_**March 19, 2544 (Estimated Military Time) \ Paris, Paris System.
(Age 7)**_

**Zeke **

Fire.

I screamed in terror as the world around me was ablaze with searing fire. The towering buildings of Eclipsia were glowing red within the flames, while hungry fire swept through the streets.

The forest where my sisters and I had played Hide-and-Seek in yesterday had been reduced to a smoldering, barren wasteland; traces of fire still burning the fallen leaves and sending smoke looming in the air.

Even the vast moon was engulfed in red light; it's blood red glow illuminating the dark sky.

The shrieks, cries, and screams of the city sent shivers down my spine. Voices screaming out in agony and horror came from around me as people died or watched their loved ones die. Men, women, and children were killed by the fierce flames, their bodies shrinking into charred husks as they screamed and fell. Others were cut down by the dozens of men in black armor that wreaked havoc through the streets; firing their weapons and slaughtering countless people.

I stood in fear and terror as I gripped my favorite Spartan doll, the small, green, plush doll dangling in the smoky air. I coughed loudly as ash and smoke began to cover my face, and I wiped my tears away with my hand.

_A black dog limped through the street ahead of me, whimpering in pain and suffering as fire continued to cover its entire body. After

a few more strained steps the dog collapsed, twitching violently as the fire burned its life away._

_ "Agnes! Look! It's that little boy who's always taking sweet rolls from our stand with his sisters!"_

_ "Bloody hell! What is he doing here all alone? It's a damn miracle that the soldiers didn't cut him down already!"_

_ "Agnes, we need to get him to safety! Let's take him to the safe house with us!"_

_ "Alright, my love. Come here, boy! Hurry!"_

_ I looked at the old man with widened eyes as he beckoned me to come. I gripped my plush doll tighter, not knowing what to do._

_ "Hurry, boy! There isn't much time!" the old man shouted, his gray beard covered in ash. His wife watched from behind him; a plump, old lady with long, gray hair and rosy cheeks._

_ I hurried over to them, hearing the screams of the dying around me as I grabbed the mans hand._

_ "Let's go!"_

_ We ran through the street and into a dark alley, our breaths coming in short gasps as we raced through the smoke filled corridor._

_ I held back tears as fear strangled my heart; the sounds of agony and pain ringing though the cityscape._

_ We reached the end of the alley and stopped, our eyes widened in horror as we gazed at the intersection ahead._

_ A dozen black-armored soldiers were standing around a burning pile; fire and smoke rising from the pile. The pile was burned black and ten feet high, with red embers and flames licking the insides._

_ "God help us allâ€|" the old lady whispered as she stared at the pile, tears streaming down her face._

_ The 'pile' was made entirely of burned bodies; the faces of perished women and children melded into the mass of limbs and hair by the flames. A horrid odor filled the air, and I could almost see the very souls of the deceased screaming in agony as they were released from their bodies._

_ "Over here!" the old man, Agnes, said as he ran through the shadows of the sidewalk, with his wife and me close behind._

_ Gunfire filled the air as we went, driving us closer to panic and insanity._

_ "HELP ME! OH GOD HELP ME!" a women screamed as she stumbled through the street._

_ Three soldiers with their pants down laughed maniacally as they jumped on her, cutting off her clothes with their knives and taking

her in the street. She screamed in pain and agony as they entered her and ravaged her insides. When they were done they opened her throat, laughing as blood seeped from her exposed windpipe._

Run!" Agnes shouted to us as he barreled down a side alley. We followed, praying that the soldiers didn't notice our presence.

We ran through the alley, Agnes' wife weeping as tears fell from her cheeks.

It's okay, Mabry. Everything's going to be okay. We'll make it through this." Agnes told his wife as we went, coming out of the alley and into the intersection beyond.

There was a loud crack that echoed through the air. I looked up at Agnes, watching as the side of his head exploded outwards in a blast of brain matter, skin, bone, and blood.

The old man fell to the ground, a hole the size of a baseball in the side of his head. Mabry let out a blood-curdling scream as she watched him fall, dropping to her knees.

NO! AGNES! NO!" she bawled, screaming.

I didn't know what to do. This woman would get me killed, just like her husband. I had to leave.

I glanced at the old lady one last time before running through the empty intersection.

I heard another crack as the hidden sniper fired his rifle, and the old lady stopped screaming.

There was nothing left as I ran through the street.

No gunshots.

No screaming.

No agony.

Silence.

Darkness.

I followed the familiar street back towards my home, spotting the three bicycles that my sisters and I had ridden earlier today. They were bathed in rust and ash, along with all the other houses on my street.

Mailboxes were alight as I ran passed, and the burning husks of corpses were sprawled along the sidewalks.

Cindy Patterson, my best friend and crush through kindergarten and first grade lay on her back in front of her house; her blue dress turned black by the searing flames. Her auburn hair was now a bundle of shriveled threads and the skin had been completely eaten away by the fire.

_I vomited when I looked at her, bending over as the brown puke

splashed into the charred street._

I opened the front gate and stumbled up the stairs leading into my home; a large, burning mansion surrounded by the charred remains of flowers, grass, and trees. The windows were all shattered, and the lovely white paint had been morphed into black ash by the flames.

I saw the large fountain of the Greek God Poseidon; a granite statue of a large man pointing his marvelous trident towards the moon while streams of spring water shot from his feet.

My father was hanging from the God's trident; a rope wrapped tightly around his neck and swaying gently from the statue. His head was lowered, and his black suit was covered in blood and cuts. His feet dangled limply in the air, and his red tie drifted in the wind.

A knot grew in my stomach as I stared at my father, my heart devoid of all feeling.

I didn't weep. I didn't cry. There were no more tears left in me.

I continued onward, not daring to look back at my father.

The large front door had been ripped off the hinges and thrown aside.

I ran into my home, my eyes darting frantically around the entry hallway as I searched for the rest of my family. Chairs and tables were thrown around the hall and doors had been ripped into pieces, cluttering the floor.

I heard screaming and shouting coming from the end of the hall, where the door to the living room was shut. I slowly made my way towards the door, my breath low and my heart gripped in fear. I could hear voices and shouts, and the unmistakably cry of my mother.

I grabbed the doorknob and twisted it open, allowing the door to slowly swing open to reveal the living room.

The living room looked as if a hurricane had hit: Couches and tables had been overturned, and things were scattered about the floor. Fire had consumed the walls and the drapes on the windows, and caused the temperature in the room to rise significantly.

Twelve soldiers in black armor stood around the room, while a tall, ominous, intimidating man in a black suit stood in front of my mum.

My three sisters were screaming in a corner as a soldier with a red scar over his right eye raped them, savagely beating them if they resisted.

My mother was whimpering as she sat on her knees, a rope binding her body and her black hair clouding her face. Her eyes caught mine, and I could feel her emotions channel through my being.

_The man in the black suit looked back at me, a sly smile appearing on his stern face. He was tall and well groomed, with sleek black

hair, and piercing blue eyes._

The man in the black suit withdrew a pistol from his pocket and held it in his hands, continuing to grin at me.

I remained motionless, too terrified to move.

_ "Noâ€|please noâ€|not my sonâ€|not my only sonâ€|" my mother pleaded with the man, her face covered in bruises._

_ "Oh, do not worry, my dear; he's the reason we're here." The man said to her, looking down at her._

_ "Pleaseâ€|please don't harm my sonâ€|" she cried, her breaths coming in short gasps._

_ "There, there; don't cry. I promise. No harm will come to the boy." The man said._

_ Suddenly the soldiers raised their rifles at my three sisters and fired, puncturing their small bodies with bullet holes. Blood shot into the air as my sisters dropped to the ground; their eyes open as they stared into nothingness. The oldest of them, Rachel, was eleven._

The man in the black suit raised his pistol and fired a single round into my mum's forehead, jerking her head backwards as blood seeped into the air. My mum fell back to the ground, her head slamming into the floor and causing her blank eyes to stare at me. Blood streamed from the hole in her forehead.

_ "But I can't say the same for you." the man said as he put the pistol back in his pocket._

_ "What do we do with the boy, Grayson?" a soldier asked the man, glancing at me._

_ "We're taking him with us. He's a perfect candidate for our program." Grayson replied, his cold eyes upon me._

_ "Yes sir." The soldier said as he walked towards me._

_ I backed away, dropping my Spartan doll onto the floor._

_ The soldier reached me in seconds and slammed the butt of his rifle into my head, sending blazing light through my vision and a ringing through my ears._

_ I dropped to the floor, feeling my grasp on the world slip away as I fell into unconsciousness._

Darkness.

* * *

><p>March 21, 2544 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System. (Age 7)_

_ "Wake upâ€|wake up my little angelâ€|I love you so much."_

My mother's voice. She would say that every morning before school. I'd always wake up and see her smiling face above me; the sweet scent of almonds in her hair. She'd kiss me on the forehead and hold me; the aroma of eggs coming from the kitchen.

_ "Wake upâ€|wake up my little angelâ€|I love you so much." _

_ I opened my eyes._

_ There was no mum. There was no smell of almond. There was no smile. There was no kiss._

_ The soldier with the scar over his right eye was standing over me, holding a tape recorder in his hand._

_ "Wake up, little angel. Welcome to hell." The soldier said with a grin._

_ He turned off the tape recorder, and I never heard my mum's voice again._

_ The soldier punched me in the gut, causing me to scream in pain as his armored fist connected with my bare chest. I could feel blood churn in my gut and could taste it in my mouth._

_ The soldier punched me in the face, knocking my head to the side before punching me in the gut again._

_ I clenched my teeth as he continued to beat me, his fists forming bruises on my naked body. Blood seeped from my lips as I struggled to remain conscious._

_ After what seemed like an eternity of punching me again and again the soldier stopped, catching his breath as he stood._

_ I coughed, vomiting blood onto the metal floor._

_ I was sitting in a wooden chair, my arms and torso tied to the frame by a thick rope. A single light bulb hung from the ceiling, illuminating the small, metal room. A door was closed behind the soldier: the only way out of the metal cell._

_ "Myâ€|sistersâ€| " I murmured through gasps of breath._

_ "Your sisters? They're dead; Grayson made me put bullets in their brains. Such a waste; I would have loved to fuck their tight little cunts again." the soldier commented, his grin turning into a frown._

_ "GRAAUGH!" I shouted at him, murderous intent in my eyes and roar._

_ His fist slammed into my jaw and dislocated it, sending jolts of pain through my head._

_ I grew silent, unable to speak._

_ "That's better." The soldier said, grinning again._

_ The soldier punched me across the face one last time, putting all

his strength into the swing and creating a large cut reaching from my forehead down to my left cheek. I grunted in pain as blood poured from the wound and blurred my vision._

He dug his hand in his pocket and removed a small scrap of paper, glancing down at it.

"**Zeke**." He read the paper aloud. He turned to look at me, "That's your name now."

I spat at him, missing by several feet.

He moved forwards and kicked me in the chest, breaking a rib and shattering the wooden chair behind me. I fell backwards and smashed my head against the metal floor as the chair broke into pieces around me. The rope loosened and fell away from my body.

Aw shit, that's not good. I'll have to tell Bennett to get you a metal chair next time, or maybe some steel shackles so we can bind you to the wall! Sit tight, ya little shit; I'll be back." The soldier laughed as he turned and walked towards the door.

I fought through the grogginess in my head and the aching pain throughout my body and rose to my feet, grabbing the bundle of rope below me.

I silently crept towards the soldier, gripping the rope tightly between my hands.

The soldier continued walking and chuckling, unaware of my presence.

Before he could reach the door I pounced at him, wrapping the rope around his neck and crossing my arms; tightening the rope and strangling him.

The soldier gasped and struggled to breathe as I pressed my feet against his back, shoving him down towards the floor and slamming his head against the wall.

He tried to fight back but found that he couldn't, every attempt to move awarding him with a vicious tightening of the rope.

I lowered one of my hands and grabbed his Combat Knife, taking it out of its sheath. With a roar I raised the knife and stabbed the soldier several times in his groin, feeling the blade sink into his body and bring streams of blood out with it as it ascended.

The soldier let out a blood-curdling scream of terror as he stared down at me. I continued to stab him in the groin and chest over and over again, my eyes burning with hatred.

Blood began to flow from his chest and mouth as I stabbed, my body overwhelmed by rage.

I couldn't stop.

The soldier stopped moving minutes ago, but I continued to pierce his skin with the knife. I cut through his face and his neck, painting myself red with his blood.

When I came back to my senses I dropped the knife and rose, backing away from his body with wide eyes.

I looked at the door realizing that it was unlocked.

I walked towards the door, my bare feet soaking with blood.

I stumbled through the door, stopping immediately as I gazed at the hallway ahead of me.

Thirty rifles were aimed at my head as an equal amount of soldiers surrounded me, with Grayson standing among them.

_Grayson smiled and stared at me, clapping loudly. "You see? He's perfect."

>

* * *

><p>August 27, 2549 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System. (Age 12)_

If you're gonna kill me then fucking DO IT!" Vanguard shouted as he pressed his forehead against mine, his eyes like fire.

He had gotten stronger and faster over the years; meaning that a fight with him would prove risky. He was still reckless though, and unable to think outside of his own instincts during a fight.

Get the fuck out of my face before I rip your goddamn arms off!" I growled at him, meeting his gaze. The fire in our eyes was fierce enough to set the entire world on fire.

Vanguard! Zeke! That's enough!" shouted Boss as she stepped between us, stretching out her arms and pushing us back a few steps.

I struggled to reach Van but failed; her grasp was too strong.

Get out of the way, Boss! I need to kick his fucking teeth in!" Vanguard shouted in rage as he struggled towards me.

Keep talkin shitâ€!" I growled under my breath at him, awaiting the moment that Boss let me go.

I said THAT'S ENOUGH!" Boss shouted, causing everyone in the barracks to grow quiet.

Come on, Zeke." I heard Sarah say from behind me, her tender hands grabbing mine and pulling me away.

I took on last glare at Van and then turned to follow Sarah out of the barracks.

_I swear on my life: I will kill him someday.

>

* * *

><p>December 20, 2552 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System. (Age 15)_

_ "Augmentations are tomorrow. Are you nervous?" I asked Sarah, turning my head to gaze upon her beautiful face._

_ We were lying in a field of purple and pink flowers, our heads pressed against the cold ground below as we stared up at the stars. The moon was magnificent tonight; full and bright. A cool breeze swept through the field occasionally, causing the flowers to dance around us and hum softly in the wind._

_ "A little. Are you?" she asked, her hazel eyes staring into mine. I felt like looking into her gaze for a millennia, feeling my suffering and fear melt away._

_ "Not really. I'm looking forward to it." I replied, turning to gaze at a comet as it raced across the black canvas of space._

_ "I'm scaredâ€|" she admitted, her voice lowering._

_ I turned back to stare at her again, holding her hand in mine. "What? Why?" _

_ She bit her lip as she gazed up at me, her face covered in worry._

_ "I don't want you to change. After the augmentations, I don't want you to become a different person entirely. I don't want to lose you!" she confessed, her emotions pouring out of her as small, crystal tears._

_ Her words hit like spikes in my heart._

_ I lowered my head and kissed her, feeling her warm lips touch mine. I never wanted that moment to end; I never wanted to leave her embrace._

_ "I love you." I told her as I lifted my head again, caressing her cheek with my hand. "And I always will. I will never change, Sarah. I will always be me, and you will always be my Princess."_

_ "Promise?" she whispered, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight._

_ "Of course." I told her._

_ She smiled; a beautiful display that sent chills through my body and melted my sorrows away._

_ She stood and turned to me, grabbing my hands and lifting me to my feet. I gazed at her as she grabbed her shirt and lifted it over her head, tossing it aside in a cloud of flowers. The milky moonlight danced around her breasts, and formed lines of white light along her skin._

_ I quickly removed my own shirt and embraced her, covering her body with kisses as we lowering back down into the field of magnificent flowers.

>

* * *

><p>December 21, 2552 (Estimated Military Time) \ Vessius, Paris System. (Age 15)_

The flames. The darkness. The memories. The hatred. The rage. The pain.

The pain!

THE PAIN!

_ "GRAUUGH!" I heard myself scream at the top of my lungs as I shot awake, my vision red and hazy; pulsing with unbearable pain. My conscious was awake and on fire, a thousand swords of pain striking through my body. My entire being was aflame with pain, my soul itself screaming out in agony through the embers._

_ "Stop him! The augmentations aren't complete! Frank, get that sedative!"_

_ "GRRRRRAAAUUUGGGHHH!" I screamed as I lifted my body off the bed, feeling the dozens of wires and tubes stretch as they strained to stay in my naked body. Machines whined and moved as they were pulled towards me by the wires._

_ "Get that sedative! Now!"_

_ With a deafening roar I freed my body from the machines, sparks filling the small room as the wires snapped everywhere._

_ I screamed in pain and agony as I stared down at my body; my veins clearly visible beneath my pale, milky skin. My blood boiled through my veins, melting my nerves and inflaming my being._

_ One of the doctors rushed towards me with a syringe in his hand, liquid swirling inside the tube._

_ I turned my head towards him and glared at him with fiery eyes, stopping him in his tracks and causing his eyes to widen in fear._

_ I lunged at him and grabbed his neck, growling with ferocity as he screamed in fear and pain._

_ I turned and threw the doctor across the room, hearing his body snap as he smashed into the metal wall; denting it._

_ I turned to the next doctor in the room, leaping at him and closing my hands around his neck. We fell to the ground, and I shouted insanely as I slammed his head on the ground; strangling the life out of him._

_ When he stopped moving I turned to the last person in the room; a female nurse who was staring at me with widened eyes._

_ "P-pleaseâ€œ!" she beckoned, slowly inching her way towards the door._

_ "AAAAAAAARGHH!" I screamed as I lifted my head towards the ceiling, a fresh wave of burning pain erupting through my blood._

_ I lunged at the nurse and reached her with amazing speed, hearing her scream as I ravaged her body with my fists. I punched and punched and slammed my fists into her frail body, her screams getting quieter and less frequent with every passing second._

_ She stopped screaming, her body covered in blood as well as my fists._

_ With a scream of pain I lifted her corpse and threw it across the room, before kicking the metal door off its hinges and stumbling out into the small hallway._

_ "Sâ€|..aâ€|râ€|aâ€|.hâ€|.." I wheezed through gasps of pain as I stumbled through the hallway, my hands creating trails of blood on the floor and the closed doors around me._

_ I slammed open a door labeled "__**78**__" and stumbled into the room, spotting Vanguard as he lay asleep on a bed; wires and tubes connecting him to a series of machines._

_ The doctors around my friend looked back at me in shock, whispering to themselves._

_ I vomited a pool of blood before leaving the room, moving farther down the hallway._

_ I took labored steps down the hall, hearing the shouts of soldiers and doctors behind me as they ran towards me._

_ With an ear-splitting shout I slammed my shoulder into another door, stepping into the room and staring at the sight before me._

_ Sarah lay on a soft bed, wires sticking into her arms and legs. Her face was beautiful and peaceful; her eyes closed._

_ I stared at Sarah, all of my pain vanishing as I stared at the girl I had fallen in love with. She was the love of my life. She was my everything. She was the one light of hope in the enveloping darkness that formed my existence._

_ It was there, my bloody hands grasping the door frame and my glassy eyes staring at her, that I realized that she wasn't breathing. She wasn't moving. She wasn't awake._

_ "Another failure?" a nurse beside her asked._

_ "Yeah," the doctor in front of her said, lowering his head. "She's dead._

24. II: Revelations

HALO: VANGUARD

**Section Two: Guardian **

Finale

* * *

><p>Chapter Eighteen: Revelations

For Glory. For Valor. For Honor.

We fight.

* * *

><p>ACT ONE

JOHN-117

* * *

><p>Date (Unknown: ANOMALY) Location (Unknown: ANOMALY)**

"A talking light bulb?" Fisher wondered aloud as he gazed in awe at Stygian Solace, the golden monitor that was floating around his head.

"Come, Reclaimer; there is much work that needs to be done!" Stygian Solace exclaimed as he swirled around my head, the crimson light from its eye reflecting off of my visor.

"Great, another monitor. Hopefully this one is less annoying than Guilty Spark." Cortana commented, sighing.

"What work?" I asked the construct, lowering my FAMAS. This monitor didn't seem like a threatâ€|for now.

"So many questions, Reclaimer! Nevertheless, I shall do what I can to inform you of the situation. It seems that the _Vosh Mortuus_ has managed to create a central mind, which should be somewhere-" the construct started.

"Wait, the _Vosh Mortuus_? What is that?" I asked.

"_Vosh Mortuus_ is a broad name for the species of experimentations created by the Exiles. I'm almost certain that you have encountered them several times before, Reclaimer." Solace exclaimed, floating directly in front of my visor.

"Does he mean The Fallen?" Cortana wondered aloud.

_Vosh Mortuus_â€|so that's what they're called.

"Those monsters were experiments made by the Exiles?" Fisher asked the floating Construct.

"That is correct!" Solace exclaimed, bouncing up and down in the air.

"So then who are the Exiles?" Fisher asked, scratching his head.

Stygian Solace grew silent, exchanging glances between Fisher and me. After a few seconds he turned to me, its eye glowing a blood red.

"Do you know nothing of Requiem and its history?" Solace asked me, the excitement in its voice gone.

"We just arrived here a few days ago. All we know is what we found in the data logs." I answered, remembering the stasis pods we had seen in the terminal room a while back.

"This will not do! This will not do! They sent the Reclaimer here without informing him of anything?!" Solace fumed, steam emitting from its frame. "Very well, Reclaimer, I will tell you all that I know."

I gave the construct a nod. Finally, some answers.

"Requiem has had a rough history, I must admit. In the beginning it was a protocol Shield World, operated by a trusted colony of Forerunners. Two hundred years after its creation, Requiem was converted into a mass research facility, becoming the largest facility-world specialized in intensive study of the Flood. It didn't take long for the colonists of Requiem to further their research; using their own people as test subjects. The goal of their experiments was to blend the DNA of the Flood with that of the Forerunners, essentially creating the ultimate species: the Vosh Mortuus. The colonists of Requiem worshipped the Flood as gods, and sought to become gods like them and ascend into a higher plane of existence. Shortly after, the entire Forerunner civilization learned of the shady operations in Requiem and took action, banishing the colony of Requiem and trapping them on the planet; effectively naming them The Exiles. The Exiles began to slowly lose their minds as they realized that Requiem was now their prison, and their insanity fueled even more horrendous experiments and tests. Years later the Forerunner-Flood war reached its end, and the Halo Array was activated. The Exiles and their abominations were saved from the Armageddon brought on by the Halos, but the planet of Requiem soon fell into chaos when the abominations escaped and were unleashed. The Exiles were all slaughtered one by one by the Vosh Mortuus, and the planet fell into darkness. The Overseer instructed me with corrupting the data logs and hiding all trace of their experiments, creating a cover story in an attempt to hide their involvement in these atrocities from any life that happened to stumble upon the planet and claim that the entire thing was a freak accident. Millennia after millennia passed, and I slowly began to lose hope that anyone would come to help reclaim Requiem from the Vosh and help restore the facility to its former glory: but now, here you are, Reclaimer!" Stygian Solace explained, buzzing around the room.

"The Vosh Mortuus' Forerunner-Flood hybrids instead of creating gods, the Exiles created demons!" Cortana muttered, contemplating over the words.

"That's a lot to take in." Fisher said, rubbing his chin with his hand; a puzzled look on his face.

"Now that you are informed, it is time for action! Come, Reclaimer, we have much to do!" Stygian urged on, more steam rising from its frame.

"You mentioned something about the Vosh Mortuus having a central mind?" I reminded the construct.

"Yes, Reclaimer! That is why we must hurry! If the Mesa-Gravemind is not eradicated soon, it will continue to evolve and grow and eventually spread through the entire facility!" Stygian replied, his voice rushed.

"The Mesa-Gravemind? That doesn't sound good." Fisher commented.

"Far from it! The DNA samples used to create the Vosh Mortuus originate from the Mesa, which was the first experiment the Exiles conducted: an attempt to blend Forerunner DNA into a Flood Proto-Gravemind. In theory, the Vosh Mortuus are all linked to the Mesa, in the same way that Flood Forms are linked to their respective Graveminds: if we destroy the mind, then the body dies."

"And why should we help you kill this Mesa?" I asked Stygian.

The construct made an odd clicking sound as it bobbed up and down, as if it was laughing. "Isn't it obvious? You need a way out of here. I am the guardian of this entire facility. I can help you leave this prison, but only if you help me first, Reclaimer."

I grew silent, thinking over our options.

"I hate to say this chief, but he's right; we don't have a choice." Cortana said, her voice grim.

He had us trapped.

"This is bullshit, we'll find our own way out. There no way in hell I'm gonna get caught up in all this experimentation bullshit!" Fisher growled as he turned to leave, hoping that I would be right on his heels.

"Fine. We'll do it. We'll kill your Gravemind." I told the construct, stopping Fisher in his tracks.

"What?!" the rookie gasped, his eyes wide.

"Oh, excellent! Excellent! I knew you the one I was waiting for Reclaimer! Ah, yes, now we can begin our work! Let's see: first we must head for the control room to retrieve the Gate Key, which we can use to open the Archway and enter the Presidium where the Mesa-Gravemind resides. Ah, but we'll have to stumble through the Catacombs before we can get to the control room; that would be quite bothersome, but I'm confident that you'll make it out alive, Reclaimer!" Solace chirped, flying around rapidly as his voice quickened with excitement.

He stopped and floated down towards me, his eye glowing fiercely as he examined my armor. "What is this primitive Exoskeletal suit that you are wearing, Reclaimer? No, no, this simply will not do! The chances of you surviving this endeavor while wearing such ineffective armor is close to five percent! Ah, but not to worry; I'm sure we can find you some adequate armor upgrades along the way!"

"Armor upgrades?" I asked aloud.

"Well, we have no more time to waste, Reclaimer!" Stygian Solace exclaimed as he turned to us.

Before we could even speak a reply the construct began to glow a fierce golden color, and I could feel the air around me start to boil. A tunnel of intense, golden light encased me and filled my vision, and a searing heat overwhelmed my body. I began to feel weightless, and in seconds, I was gone.

* * *

><p>A second flash of light filled the encasing darkness and subsided almost as quickly as it had come, bringing with it my entire being. I could feel gravity again and I dropped down onto a metal floor, my vision blurry and my mind groggy. After the aching and the grogginess faded away I stumbled to my feet, catching my breath and scanning my surroundings.</p>

The world around me was shrouded in absolute darkness; I could see nothing but the impenetrable black. The silence that accompanied the blackness was unsettling and ominous, and a strange, rancid smell seeped through the air. The filtered air I breathed in through my helmet was cold and painful, as if a thousand, tiny needles were clawing their way down my lungs.

Another flash of golden light illuminated the world for a split second, revealing a massive, metallic, tunnel-like structure surrounding me. It seemed to stretch on for an eternity on both ends, and the ceiling was at least fifty feet above the metallic floor.

Fisher fell out of the flash of light, screaming as he hit the floor with a loud thud and a grunt. I activated the small lights on my armor, creating several beams of white light that helped illuminate some of the darkness around us.

"Are you okay?" I asked the marine as I helped him up, his squinting face visible in the pale lights shining from my armor.

"Yeah, I think so. Where are we?" he asked as he stood, shaking his head. I could see his foggy, vaporous breath as it left his mouth and nose.

"Reclaimer!" I heard Stygian Solace's voice bellow from above us.

The construct appeared in a storm of golden light and whirled above us, his crimson eye shining in the darkness.

"Come, Reclaimer, come! The Catacombs are treacherous and the control room awaits our arrival! This way!" the construct exclaimed as it began to move away from us.

"Wait!" Fisher protested, but to no avail.

Solace hummed and began to race through the air, flying forward and deeper into the tunneling dark.

"Come on, it looks like he's not going to wait up for us." I told Fisher as I began to walk after the construct, my FAMAS raised in caution. Anything could be waiting to devour us in the enveloping darkness.

"I don't like this. Something's not right." Cortana warned as Fisher and I walked through the dark, using only the lights from my armor to guide us through the Catacombs. Our boots created loud clattering sounds when they hit the metal floor, constantly revealing our presence to anything lying in wait nearby.

"How can you stay so calm?" Fisher asked me as he followed behind, the ominous silence clearly causing him to get nervous. "I mean, with everything that's happened, you've still managed to keep your cool. The Exiles, The Fallen-err, Vosh Mortuus, thisâ€|Stygian Solace, this whole goddamn planet! It's almost too much, ya know! This is too much for me, I didn't sign up for any of this!"

"Stay calm, and stay focused. All that matters is that we find a way to get home; and I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen." I told him as I continued to walk forward, glancing back at him and shining the pale lights on his face.

I didn't know how long it had been since I had last been home. A year? Two? Twenty? There was no way to find out how long I had been in cryo sleep, and that fact alone was extremely unsettling.

Would Earth still be there when I returned?

A low hissing sound echo through the tunnels, causing us to immediately crouch in alarm. Our weapons were pointed ahead of us as we tried to determine where and what the sound had come from; unable to pinpoint anything through the bitter darkness that seemed to blind us on all sides.

The noise died down and disappeared, plunging the world back into unease and silence.

The sound of tape ripping erupted through the air and I quickly turned back to Fisher, watching as he taped a small flashlight to the barrel of his MA5B in the dim light. When he was finished he clicked on the flashlight, creating a wide dome of light that shot from the tip of the weapon.

"I forgot I had those." He commented as he placed the tape back onto his utility belt, standing and illuminating the area ahead of us with the bright light.

There was nothing but walls and a continuing tunnel ahead of us.

"I'll take point; the flashlight has a wider range. Stay close behind me, though; I don't wanna get mauled from behind by some boogeyman or something." Fisher said as he moved in front of me, rifle raised and lighting the way.

A torch in the darkness.

I nodded and began to follow him, moving my head every now and then to check our surroundings.

"Your radar is still active, chief, and it has a fifty meter range. You may not be able to see everything around you in this darkness, but your radar can. Use it, chief; it just might save your life. This place reeks with the stench of the Vosh Mortuus." Cortana warned.

I took her advice and glanced down at the radar at the bottom of my HUD, taking a sigh of relief when it showed only two yellow dots.

Fisher coughed, bending over to spit phlegm onto the floor. Seconds later he stood and continued on, glancing back to make sure I was following.

"The air must be affecting his lungs. It can't say for certain if it's toxic, but there are definitely other things beside oxygen in it." Cortana said to me, concern in her voice.

My helmet's air filtration systems kept me safe from the raw air, but Fisher was a completely different story. The rookie had no helmet or air filtration system of his own, meaning he was absorbing the raw, rancid air with every breath.

We continued through the catacombs, occasionally hearing the distant sound of Stygian's humming as it echoed through the hollow tunnels. The monitor was nowhere in sight.

"Stairs." Fisher warned as he shined the flashlight over the colossal, metal staircase, revealing a massive chasm at the bottom.

I followed Fisher as he cautiously walked down the large staircase, his breathing erratic. He coughed again and spit the resulting phlegm into the air, hearing it splatter against the metal floor.

The staircase led down into a massive chasm, with glowing, blue, Forerunner symbols etched into the walls and floor and illuminating the entire chasm with dim, blue light. A massive pit that spanned a kilometer in diameter sat in the center of the chasm; a giant hole that led miles down into an impenetrable darkness. The floors were wrapped around the edge of the walls, sloping downwards and creating an enormous spiral leading down into the pit. A tiny, bright-yellow light sat in the midst of the darkness within the pit, as if a star had fallen from the sky and fell down into the hole.

"Whoaâ€¢!" murmured Fisher as he walked to the edge of the floor and gazed down into the black expanse of the pit.

"Ah, Reclaimer!"

Stygian Solace seemed to appear from within the darkness above us, swooping down to gaze at us with its large, crimson eye.

I quickly lashed out my armored hand and grabbed the construct, bringing its eye closer to my visor, "you're staying with us. No more flying off on your own."

I didn't trust the construct at all, and I would rather have it near me at all times than running off to stir up trouble. 343 Guilty Spark

had betrayed me once before, and I wasn't going to give this monitor the opportunity to do the same.

"Of course, Reclaimer, of course! I will accompany you down to the control room!" Stygian Solace whined as it struggled to break free.

After a few seconds of silence I released the construct, watching it swirl and twist around in the air.

"Come, Reclaimer! The control room waits below!" Solace exclaimed as it began to circle around my helmet excitingly.

"We're going all the way down there?!" Fisher asked the construct, pointing at the tiny light at the bottom of the massive pit.

"Come, Reclaimer, we have a long ways to go!" Stygian told me as he turned and sped off, careful to keep a pace that we could easily follow.

"It doesn't respond to me." Fisher said as we headed after the construct, following the sloping floor as it spiraled around the massive walls and deeper down into the pit.

"What?"

"The light bulb: it doesn't respond to me. Whenever I ask it something or make a comment, it always finds a way to direct the conversation back to you, as if you were the one who had said it. It doesn't acknowledge my existence. It only acknowledges you; the 'Reclaimer.'" Fisher explained, coughing again.

"He's right. I noticed it too." Cortana admitted.

"Let's just keep moving." I told them, not wanting to address the issue.

We followed the winding floor down into the pit for at least a mile; the dim light from the control room miles below taunting us. We walked in silence, save for Stygian's constant humming. The cold air and unsettling silence added a sense of foreboding in the room, and the sheer size of our surroundings made us feel dwarfed and alone.

We reached a massive, metal doorway, blocking the entire path and standing over fifty feet tall. A glowing, blue, circular symbol was etched into the center of the large door, sealing it shut.

"This way, Reclaimer." Solace said as he soared over to the door.

We walked to the door, watching in silence as a small, blue beam shot from Solace's eye and into the door, sending blue sparks into the air. Solace continued to hum, bobbing up and down as he unlocked the door.

When he was finished Stygian backed away, humming louder as a loud click came from the door.

The massive door gave an ear-splitting screech as it separated and slid open, shrieking loudly as it scraped across the metal

floor.

The circular symbol on the door broke apart to reveal sixty hands trying to desperately reach us, their pale, scrawny claws grasping fiercely at the air. The hands were connected to the bodies of thirty lurkers, their glowing eyes widened and their jaws wet and ajar as they screamed and shrieked at us. The creatures struggled to get out of the door and reach us, stumbling and tripping over each other as the door continued to slowly slide open.

"Holy shit!" Fisher cursed in fear and shock as he backed away from the door, firing his rifle at the horde of Vosh Mortuus.

I backed away as well, holding my fire but keeping my weapon aimed at the screaming creatures.

"Oh my, this is very problematic." Stygian said as he ascended into the air, his voice lowering.

The door gave way and the lurkers all stumbled through, sprinting towards us with blood-curdling screams in their throats and bloodlust in their eyes.

I opened fire with the FAMAS, sending a trio of rounds into the skull of the lead lurker. The creature stumbled and fell, its dead carcass tripping the two behind it and sending them to the ground as well. Fisher finished them off with bursts to the skulls as well, before moving on to fire at the others.

A lurker screamed as it lunged at me, arms stretched out to grip my head. I quickly sidestepped and kicked the creature in its back, hearing a snap as I broke its spine and sent it hurling off the path and down into the dark pit below.

Another tried to grab for my leg, and I quickly dispatched it with a stomp to the head. I turned and bashed the butt of my rifle into the skull of another lurker, caving in its entire face and sending it falling to the floor.

"AHH!" I heard Fisher scream, and I quickly turned to find my comrade.

Fisher was backing away from seven lurkers, his rifle gripped in own hand and his finger pressing down the trigger. An eighth lurker was grabbing on his chest, digging its jaws into his right arm and chewing off chunks of his flesh.

I quickly darted towards the rookie, shoulder-bashing a lurker and crushing its head against the wall. I turned towards the others, blowing their heads into meaty paste with controlled fire from the FAMAS.

"AH! FUCK!" Fisher screamed as the lurker on his arm turned to bite him in the neck, sinking its teeth into his skin.

I quickly lunged for the creature and grabbed it by the head, ripping it off of Fisher and slammed its face into the floor; a geyser of blood splashing everywhere as its head was crushed flat.

Fisher stumbled backwards as he struggled to get away from the fight,

blood seeping from his arm and neck and coloring the floor.

I turned back to the remaining abominations, watching as they began to surround me; their visceral eyes betraying their bloodlust.

One rushed me from the front, and was swiftly killed with a burst of bullets between the eyes. Two more rushed in, the first finding its face caved in by the frame of my rifle and the other being kicked off of the edge and into the darkened pit. I emptied the rest of the magazine into the skulls of two more lurkers before letting it fall to the floor, grabbing another from my belt and pushing it into the rifle.

The rest of the creatures completely disregarded me and dropped down to devour the bodies of their fallen comrades, and were quickly put down with relative ease.

When the chasm was silent again I lowered my rifle and turned back to Fisher. He was standing a few feet behind me, his eyes squinted in pain as he gripped his injured arm; his head slumped to one side to keep the wound on his neck from bleeding.

"Take it easy. Here, take a seat, get some rest." I told him as I walked towards him, examining his wounds.

"N-noâ€|no, I'm fine. Agh! Come on, don't worry about meâ€|I'llâ€|AGHâ€|manageâ€|" he wheezed through spasms of pains and coughs, spitting up phlegm and blood.

I stared at him, unsure of what to do. I was no medic and we didn't have the supplies to treat his wounds.

I had been rendered completely helpless.

Fisher removed the armor pieces from his right arm and ripped off the sleeve underneath, grunting in pain as he wrapped it around his wound and tied it. He took off his bandanna and wrapped it around his neck, tightening it around the wound to stop the bleeding.

When he was finished he gave me a weak grin, shouldering his rifle.
"See? I can manage. I'm not completely useless, ya know."

"Chiefâ€|" Cortana started, concern in her voice.

"My apologies, Reclaimer; I didn't comprehend the possibility of the Vosh Mortuus inhabiting this area of the facility as well. I am glad that you are uninjured, Reclaimer, but might I suggest being a little more cautious in the future? Well then, let us continue!" Stygian Solace said as he soared through the doorway ahead of us, humming happily as if it didn't have a care in the world.

"What an assholeâ€|" Fisher commented as he walked after the monitor, grunting in pain with every step.

I stepped in front of him, blocking the way. "You hang back and try to relax, I'll lead."

After a few moments he gave a sheepish nod, following slowly behind me.

We continued after Solace as he hummed and soared down the sloping floor, talking to itself and occasionally making the weird clicking noise that resembled laughter.

A lurker stood on the path a kilometer away from us, its head lowered and swaying as it panted heavily. As we got closer it snapped its head toward us and shrieked, breaking off into a sprint.

I raised my rifle and squeezed the trigger, sending a trio of bullets deep into the creature's brain.

It tripped and fell, lying motionless at my feet.

We continued on, encountering four more lurkers who were quickly dispatched by my rifle.

"Hurry, Reclaimer!" Solace would exclaim every few minutes as it bobbed joyfully in the dim light, its red eye peering back at us creepily.

We had to stop several times and give Fisher a few minutes to rest and catch his breath. He was getting worse with every step we took; his breaths coming as labored gasps and violent coughs.

We needed to find a way out of here, and fast.

We must've walked at least five miles downwards through the spiraling chasm, with no clue of how much farther we had left. The light at the bottom of the pit was still leagues away.

We passed through another large door, this time only finding one lurker awaiting us on the other side. I killed the creature with a single bullet, plunging it deep into the abomination's head.

The path ahead led to a dead-end; the floor ending abruptly and creating a sudden cliff. A large, circular pad was placed in the center of the floor, the mysterious metal glowing a soft blue.

"Ah, here we are!" Solace exclaimed as he hovered above the circular pad, looking back at us. "Well, what are you waiting for? Come on!"

With no other choice we stood over the pad.

Stygian Solace shot a beam of blue light down onto the center of the pad, causing the entire pad to jolt violently. Seconds later the pad began to slowly descend, passing through the floor and continuing down through a cylindrical, metal tunnel.

"An elevator?" Fisher wondered aloud as the pad continued to fall downwards; blue streaks of light attached to the walls passing by us and shooting upwards as we fell.

Stygian began to hum again, bobbing up and down impatiently.

"Where is this thing taking us?" I asked the construct.

"Down to the control room, of course! Did you think I'd make you walk the entire way there? It would've taken you days to reach the bottom on foot, Reclaimer!" Stygian replied, making the clicking noise

again.

* * *

><p>After what seemed like an eternity of falling, the circular pod finally slowed to a halt, exiting the long tunnel and resting atop another metal floor.</p>

A metal bridge spanned before us, stretching over a kilometer in length before expanding to create a large, circular island beyond. A massive, glowing tower sat atop the metal island, bright, golden light emanating from the ancient structure. Above the tower spanned the chasm's pit, which continued on below and was lost in eternal darkness.

"This is Requiem's control room. This way, Reclaimer!" Solace chimed as he raced over the bridge, humming again.

"Come on, Fisher." I said as I helped him up, lending him my shoulder for support. He thanked me and began to walk, his breathing shallow.

He was getting worse.

We made our way over the bridge and reached the tower, stopping to watch Solace as he unlocked the giant golden door leading into the control room.

"Ah ha!" exclaimed Solace as the door swung open, and he quickly flew inside.

The control room was enormous: Forerunner terminals and machines lined the walls, all connected by glowing blue wires that melded with the walls and the floor. The wires pulsed in unison every few seconds, as if the entire room had its own heartbeat. Ancient runes and symbols adorned the walls and floated through the air, and rays of golden light seemed to rise from the floor and shoot up through the tower.

Two holograms were displayed on a large console in the center of the room. The first was a large, bright yellow, hollow orb, with a large hole on the outside and a smaller orb of light in the core. The second hologram was of a Halo, its structure surrounded by a transparent orb of light.

"Whoa!" Fisher murmured through labored breaths as he gazed at the gorgeous room, awestruck.

"This place is a treasure trove of Forerunner technology! Think of all the knowledge that was left behind in these terminals! There's so much here that we could learn." Cortana gasped in amazement. She wanted to stay here; to bask in the knowledge of the Ancients.

I had different plans.

"Here, Reclaimer!" Solace called as he flew towards a large terminal, shooting a blue beam into the machinery.

The machine shifted and morphed, the metallic covering shifting together to reveal a compartment inside the machine. A small,

metallic orb was placed in the compartment, its surface scarred with ancient runes and symbols. The orb emitted an aura of green light, and seemed to warm the air around it as I walked nearer.

I reached out and grabbed the orb, feeling its warmth through my armored gauntlet.

"Now that we've retrieved the Gate Key, we can open the Archway and enter the Presidium!" Stygian Solace exclaimed, bobbing up and down in the air.

"Hooray!" mumbled Fisher sarcastically before coughing up more blood. He groaned and took a seat, leaning against a terminal.

Solace grew silent and began to stare directly at Fisher, as if he was just now noticing that he was there. "Ah, yes, there is the question of what to do about this anomaly!"

Solace turned back towards the terminal and shot another beam into it, blue sparks flying everywhere.

Suddenly the massive door swung shut, locking us inside the control room. I whirled around, my rifle raised as I tried to figure out what was happening.

"Chief!" Cortana murmured, clearly uneasy.

The air began to thicken, and the rancid smell of flesh and death began to grow stronger. A green mist began to rise from the floor and fog the air, slowly spreading through the entire room. Tiny particles were drifting carelessly in the haze, clustering the air and numbering in the millions.

"This isn't good! Chief, the air is being filled with trillions upon trillions of bacteria, every one of them made of the same plasmids!" Cortana warned.

"What does that mean?!" I asked her, frantically trying to figure out where the gas was coming from.

"It means that they're all of the same bacterial type! They're all parasitic bacterium! They're parasites, Chief!" she explained, her voice panicked.

"AGHHHH!" Fisher screamed, causing me to turn towards him.

Fisher was flailing and jerking around violently on the floor, his eyes bloodshot and the veins pressed against his skin. He screamed in horror as he continued to involuntarily breathe in the toxic air, the wounds on his neck and arm emitting a green liquid. White foam bubbled from his mouth, and his skin began to turn deathly pale.

"FISHER!" I shouted as I stepped towards him, fully aware that I could do nothing to save him.

He lifted his head and screamed in complete terror, his eyes rolling into the back of his head as he let out a blood-curdling cry. Blood seeped from his eyelids and his mouth, and he began to viciously bash

his head against the floor; cracking his skull several times.

I backed away, too shocked for words.

He shrieked again as he began to use his bony hands to rip out his hair; his milky white fingernails growing out into menacing claws. He ripped out chunks of hair and skin, continuing to scream as he flailed around the floor in intense seizures. He vomited out pints of blood and phlegm, green mist escaping his bowels as well.

After a final shriek Fisher grew silent, his breaths escaping as labored rasps. He was crouching on all fours, his head lowered to the ground.

119 Stygian Solace bobbed above Fisher's head, humming loudly as he rocked from side to side.

"Chief-" Cortana whispered, her voice hushed.

Fisher's head snapped towards me at an awkward angle, an audible snap erupting from his neck as the bone broke.

He glared at me with pure white eyes, his mouth ajar and revealing his jagged, bloody teeth.

He shrieked loudly as he stood and sprinted towards me, foam and blood dropping from his jaws.

"Chief!"

I raised my rifle and pressed it against Fisher's head, closing my eyes as I squeezed the trigger.

The resulting blast sent Fisher's body flying backwards several feet, crashing into a terminal and remaining motionless. Blood poured from the wound on his head, creating puddle on the floor.

I lifted my rifle higher and fired at the floating construct, forcing Stygian to twist and turn swiftly to avoid being hit.

"GRAUUUUUAAAGHH!" came a scream from across the room as Fisher's corpse rose and ran towards me again, sending a surge of fear through my heart and chills racing up my spine.

The rookie tackled me in the chest and sent us both crashing down to the floor, knocking my rifle out of my hand and sending it sliding across the room.

I grunted as I used my armored hands to keep Fisher's head at bay, his jaws snapping dangerously close to my visor as he attempted to maul me to death. His claws lashed constantly at my chest and arms, scratching my armor.

I brought up my left knee and slammed it into Fisher's chest, breaking a few ribs and arching his back. I sent my right fist into his face as hard as I could, shattering his nose and hurling him backwards. Fisher crashed back onto the floor several meters away from me, blood escaping from the hole that used to be his nose.

I stood, preparing for his next charge.

Fisher let out a scream and sprinted towards me, his arms flailing at his sides.

I quickly lunged forwards and grabbed him by the head, shoving his head down into the floor.

I stomped on his chest and held him in place, throwing my fists into his skull over and over again. Blood began to cover my gauntlets as I continued to rain a barrage of punches down on his head, cracking the bones and denting his skull in several places.

When I was finished I stood again, catching my breath and holding my bloodied fists at my side.

Fisher remained motionless below me, his head almost unrecognizable. He never moved again.

I looked up to find Stygian Solace humming above me, making the oh-so-familiar clicking sound.

* * *

><p>ACT TWO

VANGUARD

* * *

><p>July 30, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Storm-Crest Province, Spira.

"His COMM's cut off."

"I can't find him anywhere on the radar!"

"None of the soldiers have seen him; it's pretty hard for them NOT to spot a black-armored Spartan."

"Are you sure that's his blood on the helmet?"

"There's no way to confirm it without the right equipment and his DNA. It's a possibility."

"Goddamnit!" I cursed as I paced around the Warthog; Gizmo and Hercules leaning against the frame while Deseron sat in the passenger seat.

The rest of our fleet was waiting in the grass fields around us, while our frontlines continued to fight the Covenant resistance keeping us out of the canyon. Pretty soon we would press on and advance into the canyon.

"We can't stay here, Vanguard. We'll continue the charge and head into the canyon; maybe we'll meet up with him on the way there." Deseron reminded me.

"I could go look for him." Hercules volunteered, raising his armored hand.

"No." I answered him, "It's too risky. We're already missing one Spartan; I don't want to misplace another."

"Van, maybe he's de—" Hercules started, his voice solemn.

"No. He's not. Not him. Not Zeke." I shot at Hercules, who grew silent.

"Maybe he just ran off to fight on his own; he always hated fighting around us and others. It made him feel like he was being pulled on a leash." Gizmo reminded.

"Maybe. But he would have told me before he went." I replied, sighing.

I wanted to drop everything and go find him myself; but I couldn't. There wasn't enough time.

Damn it all!

I turned and gazed at the two, looming mountains miles ahead of us, where purple frigates seemed to hover above their summits.

Zekeâ€|

Where the hell are you?!

* * *

><p>The sun was peaking in the sky and beating down on the grass field with warm rays, while a cool breeze swept through the landscape and moved the grass like waves.</p>

We had decided to continue with the advance alongside Deseron and the UNSC Fleet. Gizmo and Hercules were completely against it, but they knew where their loyalties lied. They wouldn't disobey a direct order from me, and they knew they were needed on the battlefield; not out in the middle of nowhere trying to find a punk Spartan.

Zeke would have to wait.

"And this is Spartan Honor Team?" asked General 'Armstrong' Rogers as he came to greet us. His bulky, robotic arm clanked loudly against his battle armor as he walked, and his coal black beard shifted softly in the breeze. His face was stern and intimidating; his eyes like fierce, black holes.

Every soldier nearby immediately stopped what they were doing and gave the General a crisp salute.

Hercules, Gizmo, and I saluted in unison, our visors facing the towering General.

"It's nice to finally meet you face-to-face, Spartans. I'm Joseph Rogers; General of Nova Company Charlie Division." The General said, taking the time to shake all of our armored hands.

"I'm Vanguard, and this is Gizmo and Hercules. It's an honor to meet

you, sir." I told him as I introduced my team.

General Armstrong was the stuff of legends; famous within the UNSC for his feats on Harvest during the first war. He had led his Company through six, long weeks of intense battle and sacrifice before being evacuated from the planet. During his Six Weeks' Campaign, Armstrong had saved thousands of civilian lives and killed an equal number of Covenant soldiers, while only losing seventy of his own men.

"Our offensive strategy has been prepped and confirmed sir. Our infantry will advance into the canyon with our armor assisting them from the rear. The 64 Recon will protect our marines from any aerial assaults and attempt to disable any enemy armor. Once we reach the crevice and the crater, the 33rd Recon will drop in as our reinforcements, and the 13th Halcyon will assist from the air. Honor Team will be stationed on the frontlines alongside Nova Delta until we reach the crater, where they will break away from the fleet and attempt to find and eliminate the Covenant Warlord." Reported Deseron to the General.

"Sounds solid. Go talk to the other commanders and make sure they know what's going on. I want our fleet ready to advance in two hours." Armstrong said to Deseron, who gave a salute and walked away.

Armstrong turned to me, his eyes burning through my visor. His stare was unwavering and emotionless, as if his eyes were lifeless already.

"Remove your helmet, Spartans." He ordered.

We stood there, motionless and silent.

The soldiers around us had stopped what they were doing when they heard the General's order, turning to see if we would comply.

Seeing a single Spartan's face was extremely rare, but seeing THREE Spartan's faces was completely unheard of.

I nodded to the General and grabbed my helmet.

I couldn't disobey a direct order from my superior.

I lifted the helmet over my head and tucked it under my arm, feeling the cold breeze hit my pale skin.

My teammates did the same, tucking their helmets under their arms as well.

The soldiers around us gasped in surprise as they gazed at our faces, whispering to each other while Armstrong remained silent.

Gizmo glanced around us, his short, blonde hair rustling in the breeze. His striking, green eyes darted from side to side, and his skinny face was pale and fragile.

Hercules had short, brown hair; his dark, brown eyes lowered down towards the ground. His face was strong and stern, with a chiseled jaw and a milky scar on his nose.

They had both changed so much since our years at Ragnarok, and I had never realized until now.

"Hm." General Rogers commented as he examined our faces, his eyes showing no emotion. "I would have never imagined Spartans to be so young. You're all children; you have yet to witness the true horrors of war."

With that the General walked back towards the Command Tent, his soldiers turning to follow him.

We quickly put our helmets back on, sighing in relief as we watched him go.

I turned back to my team, glancing at their golden visors. "Well, that wasâ€¦uncomfortable."

* * *

><p>"Thirty minutes till the assault! If you are unsure about where you are positioned or what platoon you're assigned to, please find the nearest commander! Weapons and ammo are located in the armory tent! Let's move, people!" a Sergeant yelled as marines ran past him, preparing for their push into the canyon.</p>

Overhead, pelicans and falcons were dropping off ammo crates and picking up marines, the loud hum of their engines filling the cool air. Warthogs and tanks were being restocked and prepped for battle; marines grunting as they hefted the large ammo crates onboard the vehicles.

I sat in the passenger seat of our warthog, watching the frantic activity around us. I willed myself to look at the faces of as many marines as I could, wondering which of those faces I would find blank and lifeless on the canyon floor.

In my mind, they were already dead.

"Are you sure?" Hercules asked the marine standing beside our warthog. He had been driving us around the grass fields for the past twenty minutes, asking soldiers if they'd seen any trace of our missing comrade.

"Yes sir. Dickerson said he had spotted the black-armored Spartan running through the fields during the battle, but lost track of him shortly after. That's all I've heard." The marine replied, using his helmet to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"Thanks for the info." Hercules sighed as he gave the marine a nod and hit the gas, causing the warthog to lurch forward.

"Damnit. Where the fuck IS he?!" Hercules growled as he drove our warthog through the field, turning the wheel occasionally to avoid hitting soldiers and vehicles.

"We're out of time. We'll have to pick up the search after the battle." I told him, trying my best to stay hopeful.

"Zeke's a pretty tough guy. He'll find his way back to us." Gizmo added as he stood behind the LAAG.

"Hopefully." Hercules replied, doubt in his words.

"BRAKE!" I shouted as I slammed my hands onto the dashboard.

Hercules cursed and hit the brake, causing the vehicle to stop abruptly meters away from the pair of soldiers that were carrying an ammo crate through the field.

The soldiers looked up at us with wide eyes, realizing that they had almost been run over by a Spartan.

"And you say I'M bad at drivingâ€|" I mocked Hercules as he turned to me.

"The last time you were allowed to drive was over ten years ago, and that's because you almost killed us all by outrunning a pelican!" Hercules retorted.

"At least I had my eyes on the roadâ€|" I replied, grinning.

* * *

><p>The tension in the air was rising.</p>

Less than a mile away from us was an entire Covenant Fleet; their ships looming in the air and their soldiers lying in wait within the dark of the canyon.

They were there to stop us.

We were here to push through them.

In front of me stood over three hundred marines: the UNSC Frontline. They looked at me with respect and confidence, nodding as I paced by them. Seven hundred comrades waited behind them, making last minute preparations before they began their assault.

Brigadier General Deseron walked beside me, with Hercules and Gizmo standing amidst the Frontline. His eyes were calm as he surveyed the fleet, his gaze warming their spirits.

Behind us were the canyons that sat between the looming mountains, shadows blanketing the rocks and covering the Covenant army waiting within in fierce darkness. We all knew they were there: Waiting. Watching.

"Is everything in place?" I asked one of my closest friends, turning back to look at the Brigadier General. We had fought several bloody battles together in the past, and I was glad that he would be by my side for yet another one.

"Yes. Armstrong's soldiers are more than ready to fall in when we begin the charge, and the 33rd is prepared to drop when we breach the crater. My men are a little nervous about leading the entire fleet, but I think they'll manage." Deseron replied, scratching the back of his neck. I could tell he was starting to feel uncomfortable.

I smiled behind my visor and put an armored hand on his shoulder,

easing his soul. He gave me a nod, before addressing his men.

"LISTEN UP!" he started, raising his voice so the entire company could hear. "I know you all. I know your faces. I know your stories. I know your fears. We've suffered through the unthinkable, we've seen family and friends taken from us at every turn. But through it all, we have survived. We have prevailed! I know you dread the coming fire, you fear what lies beyond the horizon. But look, my brothers: there, beyond the crest of the hills and through the shadows and dark lies our future; our destiny. There lies the tens, the hundreds, the thousands that seek to destroy us, and our homes as well! I know you, my brethren, and I know you wish to see the end of the storm. It is coming! This is it! This is the final battle! If we triumph tonight then we will prevent another war! We will prevent more death! We will prevent more suffering! We will have brought a rise to a new age; an age of eternal peace!"

I watched as the faces of the marines were lifted into boundless courage, their eyes flashing with immeasurable confidence.

"There, within the darkness, lies a Warlord; an Elite shaken to the core by the fact that we won't back down. He dreads our coming, my brothers, because he has realized one fact about humanity! He has realized that for centuries we have never backed down! If there is one fact that we have burned into the very minds of the Covenant over the years, it's that UNSC marines never give up! We will always be here to stop the chaos and shape the future of the galaxy! We will always FIGHT!" Deseron shouted with intense emotion, raising his rifle into the air.

"WE FIGHT!" came the shout of over three hundred soldiers, their voices creating a massive crescendo of courage that swept across the entire field and echoed off the cliffs of the mountains.

"WE FIGHT!"

"WE FIGHT!"

I brandished my MA6D and joined my team, turning back to gaze into their golden visors.

"This is it, Honor. This is the final chapter of our lives. This is where heroes are born." I told them.

They nodded, their silence unsurprising.

I grabbed the back of their helmets and pulled them towards me, closing my eyes as our helms collided with each other. For an instant a wave of memories flooded my mind, drowning me in a sea of emotions.

These were my brothers.

"We have one objective." I said as I released them, looking back into their visors. "Stop Odin from activating that artifact. At all costs."

* * *

><p>"FOR GLORY! FOR VALOR! FOR HONOR!" the three hundred soldiers that made up the UNSC Frontlines chanted as they charged towards the Covenant lines waiting in the entrance of the canyon, their rifles roaring in unison and flashing with fire. "WE FIGHT!"</p>

The shouts and battle cries of the seven hundred marines behind us filled the air, trumpeting over the roar of gun fire and echoing through the mountains. The voice of humanity filled the air and caused our spirits to soar as we smashed into the Covenant defense, plowing through their forces like a hurricane.

"For Selene!" I shouted through the Squad-COMM as I activated my energy sword, the glowing blade flashing a bright blue as I held it at my side.

I sprinted through the chaos with Hercules and Gizmo close behind.

I rushed through the Covenant ranks, swinging my sword arm in a blur of white and blue and cleaving my enemies in half.

I ducked under a plasma grenade thrown by a courageous grunt and stabbed him through the chest with my sword, hearing his armor and flesh sizzle from the heat. I removed my blade and swung horizontally, ripping the two grunts behind it in two; their torsos falling to the ground while their waist and legs continued to stand.

I moved through the corpses and moved on, facing the thousands of Covenant soldiers ahead of me with growing ferocity.

I was not afraid.

An Elite Major moved to intercept me, swinging towards my head with an energy sword. I dropped to a slide and rolled under his swing, bringing up my sword and cutting through his waist. The Elite gasped as his body split into two, his intestines spilling onto the canyon floor.

I turned to grab its energy sword, grinning as I felt its weight in my left hand.

I turned back to the battle, watching as marines continued to charge through the Covenant soldiers. The air was filled with plasma and bullets as the two forces clashed, the world around us morphing into a chaotic warzone.

I rolled to the side to avoid a blast from a plasma mortar, using the energy swords to cut through the chunks of debris that fell down towards me. I looked ahead and spotted a Wraith rush towards me through the Covenant horde, its cannon warming as it prepared to fire another volley.

Hercules ran up to me and raised his Spartan Laser, firing an enormous red beam at the Wraith. The tank exploded when the beam touched it, creating a large blast of plasma and fire that engulfed the Covenant troops around it.

"I had that one!" I shouted at him as I lunged at the jackal skirmisher racing towards me, sticking a sword through its throat.

Hercules chuckled, firing his Spartan Laser and exploding the ground beneath six grunts. The alien's bodies flailed like ragdolls through the air, smoke rising from their charred armor.

I deflected a blow from the sword of another Elite Major with my left sword, using my right to stab the alien in the chest. A final swing removed the Elite's head, its helmet clanking against the ground.

"You make it look easy!" Hercules shouted to me through the squad-COMM as he caved in the face of an Elite Minor with his fist.

"It IS easy!" I told him as I ducked under another plasma grenade and beheaded the grunt that had thrown it. "You should try it sometime!"

"Heads up!" he shouted as he pointed ahead.

I turned, watching as a ghost raced towards me, attempting to splatter my brains against the canyon floor.

"AH! DEMON!" the grunt controlling the vehicle shrieked, its small, beady eyes widening.

I sidestepped a split second before the ghost slammed into me, bringing my sword down through the side of the vehicle; cutting the grunts arms off and the entire front of the ghost.

The vehicle exploded in a haze of purple plasma as the alien shrieked in pain, its body slowing burning in plasma fire.

Gizmo raced past me, his armor glowing blue with energy as he wreaked havoc on the Covenant soldiers nearby. I watched in awe as he tore through ten Elite Majors and the grunts under their control, static sparking from his fists and armor as he moved.

I moved to catch up with my teammates, gliding through the Covenant soldiers around me and separating their limbs from their bodies. Gizmo continued to wade through the Covenant ranks with fists flying in all directions, his Armor Lock protecting him from the volleys of plasma fire and even a few explosions caused by mortars. Hercules was busy targeting the surrounding Wraith tanks and obliterating them with his Spartan Laser, clearing paths for the marines behind us to charge through.

The marines continued to follow close behind us, sweeping up any Covenant soldiers we missed. Bodies began to clutter the ground as we moved forward, and I could constantly hear the shrieks, cries, and shouts of marines as they died around me. Blood soaked the canyon floor and even sprayed across the rocks and boulders, and vicious craters blackened the ground in several places.

I ducked as a burning pelican dropped from out of the air and crashed a few yards away from me, hitting the ground and exploding in a flaming inferno. Shrapnel shot in all directions, impaling marines and Covenant and killing them instantly.

I ducked as large shadows began to shroud the area, followed by the

deafening blasts of heat and debris as the barrage of plasma mortars hit the canyon. Shrieks and screams came from our own as they were massacred by the plasma bombardment, blue fire encasing their bodies and smoke rising from the canyon floor.

I moved behind a boulder to avoid being hit, watching in silence as the distant Wraith tanks continued to bomb the battlefield. Covenant soldier barked orders and shouted in panic as they were hit as well, their bodies being sent flailing into the air.

I looked farther down the canyon, over the heads of the Covenant soldiers ahead of me, spotting a line of Wraith tanks stationed on a large cliff about a kilometer away. They were lobbing volleys of plasma mortars into our forces, causing massive amounts of trouble.

"For Spira!" came the shouts of a squad of marines as they ran beside me, dropping into a crouch and firing their MA5Bs at the Covenant soldiers ahead. Their rifles breathed fire and sent yellow sparks into the armor of their enemies, tearing their bodies to shreds and ending their lives.

The plasma bombardment continued around them, creating a hellish glow in the air as dozens of their allies were blown into fiery chunks. The soldiers continued to fight through it all, their bravery unwavering as they raised their voices in defiance.

"FOR SPIRA!" I shouted in reply to them as I charged again, energy swords gripped tightly.

As one we pushed farther into the canyons, spirits drenched in defiance and courage. The world around us was absorbed by fire and destruction, as if the universe itself had given rise to the flames of war.

A marine fighting beside me screamed in terror as a Jackal Skirmisher fired plasma shots into his face, melting the sensitive skin and morphing his head into a smoldering crater. After a few moments the marines limp body fell, smoke rising from his skull.

I quickly turned towards the Skirmisher and swung downwards, cleaving its torso in two.

An Elite Minor threw a plasma grenade at me with amazing speed, forcing me to duck suddenly in order to avoid the projectile. The grenade passed over my head and stuck itself to the chest of a grunt behind me.

The grunt screamed and ran towards six of its comrades, no doubt shouting for them to remove the grenade. The six other grunts shrieked in shock as they struggled to get away from the grenade, bumping into each other in their panic.

The grenade detonated, killing all seven of the grunts in a storm of plasma fire and burning light.

With a roar of fury the Elite Minor charged me, its plasma rifle ablaze and launching small blobs of blue plasma towards me.

I easily evaded the plasma fire and lunged at the Elite, burning out

his eyes as I jabbed an energy sword into his head and through the back of his skull. I removed the sword and lopped off the top half of the alien's skull, shoving its limp body down to the ground.

"Vanguard!" Hercules warned through the COMM.

I rolled to the left, just in time to avoid a speeding warthog as it careened into the canyon, swerving into a power slide and splattering the brains of grunts onto the canyon boulders.

"Time to get in the war, boys!" Deseron shouted from the driver's seat, grinning wildly and honking the horn.

"HUAH!" chanted the two marines in his warthog, the soldier behind the LAAG throwing his fist into the air.

"Deseron you crazy son of a bitch!" I shouted to him as I swung through a grunt, jumping over its corpse and bring my blades down into the skull of its comrade.

Two grunts dropped their weapons and turned to flee, their hands waving in the air as they screamed.

The marine behind the LAAG opened up on the grunts, ripping their bodies apart and spilling their blood on the ground.

"Those were mine." I told the Brigadier General as I walked towards the warthog, deactivating my energy swords and brandishing the MA6D. Hercules and Gizmo had appeared behind me, their armor drenched in the vibrant blood of the Covenant.

"There's plenty to go around, my friend!" Deseron laughed, raising his M6D magnum with his left hand and firing at a fleeing grunt, killing it with three shots in the head.

"Our eyes in the sky are saying that most of the Covenant fleet is retreating back into the crater to mount a final defensive! They're giving us the canyon on a silver platter and inviting us into the crater, Spartans; and we intend to attend the party!" Deseron shouted over the roar of battle.

"LET'S GO, MARINES! GIVE EM HELL!" Deseron shouted as the warthog raced off to go cause some more trouble for the Covenant.

Roars of courage and defiance erupted behind me as the marines charged forwards with renewed vigor, slaughtering everything in their path as they rampaged through the canyon. Grunts, Jackals, Elites, Ghosts, and Wraiths were all destroyed as the frontlines rushed on, filling the canyon with the shouts of battle cries and the fires of their weapons.

Our Scorpion and Vektor tanks bombarded the Covenant forces still attempting to hold on to the canyon, slaughtering many and forcing the rest to retreat back to the crater.

Hundreds of marines cheered in triumph and joy as the last of the Covenant soldiers in the canyon turned and fled, leaving the canyon entirely under our control.

"Don't get too excited, marines!" Armstrong bellowed as he walked through the fleet, his eyes intimidating and his face emotionless. "We're not done yet. That was just a warm-up."

* * *

><p>I stood on the cliff and gazed out at the sprawling crevice before me, watching the Covenant fleet inside it as they prepared to counterattack.</p>

Enemy frigates and phantoms cluttered the air around the large crater, casting shadows over the hundreds of soldiers waiting below. At least fifty wraiths sat along the edge of the crater, behind the rows of Covenant infantry.

In the center of the massive crater was the Forerunner artifact: a tall, triangular structure jutting out of the ground. A circular platform had been built around the artifact, and I could see a single Sangheili standing atop it; garbed in a shining set of golden armor.

Odin.

"The plan is simple." Started Armstrong as he addressed Deseron and me. "First, Nova Delta will charge into the crevice through the middle, while the 109th Expeditionary and Nova Charlie rush in from the left and right flanks. The 64th Recon, the Kraken, and the Radiant Glory will all be providing support from the air. Once we've breached the crevice the Cestus will slip into orbit and drop the 33rd Recon down into the crater as reinforcements."

"It's as good a plan as any." Deseron commented.

"And how do you plan on getting my team close enough to take out Odin? There's an entire Covenant fleet between him and us." I asked Armstrong, curious.

"We need your team on the frontlines, Vanguard, so that's where they'll stay. You, however, will be dropping with the 33rd Recon. With any luck you'll land behind the enemy lines and near the artifact. From there you'll make your way up to the artifact and stop Odin from activating it." Armstrong explained, turning to stare at me.

"W-what?" I protested in shock. "You're separating my team? You can't-"

"Those are my orders, Spartan." He concluded. Turning away from me.

The General turned to Deseron, "We will begin the offensive in thirty minutes. Get this Spartan onto a Pelican and onboard the Cestus in less than ten."

* * *

><p>The pelican climbed through the air, its engine roaring fiercely as it picked up speed. Above us, through the clouds and the inside the dark of space, sat the Cestus; it's large metallic frame reflecting the light from the stars.

The blazing sun sent waves of fiery light through the air and across the horizon, creating a beautiful array of bright light and basking the billowing clouds in red light. A calm breeze swept through the pelican, brushing against my bare face and rustling through my hair.

The two mountains below had shrunken to half their size, and the rocky canyon between them had been reduced to a patch of brown space. The marines within the canyon looked like tiny dots from this distance, and the two frigates floating over the grass fields resembled long, rectangular blocks. The crater was a darkened patch of dirt within the larger circle of dirt that made up the crevice, with several purple ovals floating around it. Hundreds of purple dots littered the crevice, all organized in perfect formations.

I peered down at the landscape from my seat aboard the pelican, feeling extremely uneasy.

I should be down there; fighting alongside them.

I sighed and placed my hands on my knees, lowering my head and closing my eyes.

Odin was down there, waiting; and I would be down there soon, to meet him one last time.

One of us would be fighting for justice, and the other would be fighting for anarchy.

One would stand and walk away from the day, while the other sat at Satan's table and shared a glass of ale with the devil.

This was it.

This could be the day that I die.

I had lived my life the best that I could; trying to piece together the fragments of my being and creating something that I could be proud of. I had survived through the trials of life and done my best to come out as a better person.

But have I done that?

"I've been waiting for this day."

I looked up, staring solemnly into Selene's eyes.

She sat in the seat ahead of me, her blue armor glowing in brilliance. She stared back at me with beautiful green eyes, her dark hair resting on her shoulders. Her face was pale and magnificent, and a fire seemed to burn through her very soul, casting her being in a comforting warmth.

"I know." I told her, watching her eyes.

'I miss you.'

The words never came out.

"You're so strong, Jack. We all believe in you." she said, her voice angelic and filled with love.

The pelican became filled with familiar faces, all smiling back at me with a warmth that caught my soul on fire.

I saw Sage standing beside me, wearing her Spartan Candidate uniform and her dark hair in a ponytail. She hadn't aged a day; her soft eyes peering through me.

Princess stood beside her, her curly, brown hair shining with an impenetrable hue of light. Her face was young and soft, with piercing eyes and a smile that could brighten the darkest of days.

"Stay strong, Jack, for all of us." Tiger said as he stood in front of me, a grin on his face. His short blonde hair seemed to flow in the breeze, and the red scar on his left eye began to slowly fade away.

"You are not alone, Jack. We are all still here, and we are all still fighting with you." said Selene, her smile growing wider.

I lowered my head, closing my eyes.

"I'll see you all soon." I told them, smiling.

I grabbed my helmet from the seat beside me and placed it over my head, feeling the familiar comfort of the helm.

I opened my eyes, and lifted my head.

I was sitting alone again, with the soft breeze of the world outside sweeping across my face.

* * *

><p>ACT THREE

VANGUARD

* * *

><p>July 30, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ Storm-Crest Province, Spira.

"Ah! Vanguard! Long time no see, huh?!" laughed Wolf as I stepped into the bridge of the Cestus, walking straight into his embrace.

Ghost and Recoil smiled behind him, and the dozens of ODSTs within the bridge turned to stare in awe at me.

"It's good to see you too, my friend. How are you?" I asked him as he let go, his smile wide.

"Well, I'm standing aboard a UNSC Destroyer, about to drop alongside a company of elite ODSTs down into one of the biggest battlefields in recorded history. I'd say I'm pretty damn good! Ha ha!" he replied with a laugh.

"Oi! Vanguard! What took you so long, eh? We were expecting you to come see us a while ago! Recoil ate the sausage and eggs we made for you to eat for breakfast!" Ghost shouted to me, his face shrouded in his balaclava.

"He's been too busy fightin the good fight, he had forgotten all about us!" Recoil frowned.

"Hey shut up, ya big gorilla! Vanguard would never forget about us and all the fun we had in Kaliope! We're like his best friends! Ain't that right, Vanny?" Ghost replied, running up to me and placing an arm around my shoulder.

Vanny?

"Who would ever want to be friends with a selfish freak like you?!" I asked him as I shrugged off his arm, grinning behind my visor.

"Ouch, man! Ya know, words hurt!" Ghost whined, walking away.

We all laughed.

"So this is the fabled leader of Spartan Honor Team?" a Colonel said as he walked towards me, his helmet tucked under his arm.

The Colonel had a stern face and short, blonde hair, his blue eyes gazing at me with admiration. His ODST battle armor had been outfitted with belts of 5mm ammo strapped to his legs and chest, with the matching minigun strapped onto his back.

I had only heard stories about Colonel Zachary, and they weren't very pleasant. Apparently his squad had been mercilessly ripped apart by the Flood back on the Ark, and ODSTs under his command swear that he still has nightmares about it to this day.

"Yes sir. It's an honor to meet you." I nodded, shaking his hand.

"No no, the honor is all mine, Spartan. I've heard a lot about your achievements on the battlefield, and I must say I am beyond impressed. It will be an honor to fight by your side." The Colonel said, giving a weak grin.

"Colonel, the ground offensive has begun!" the ship's Captain, Howell, shouted from across the room.

"Are we ready to drop?" Zachary asked, turning towards the captain.

"Yes! The ship is orbiting at the correct coordinates and the trajectory of the pods should be close to perfect!" Howell replied.

"Then let's get moving, people!" Colonel Zachary shouted.

Almost instantly the room was filled with activity as ODST ran from here to there, retrieving their gear and heading for the Drop Bay.

"Looks like you came just in time, Spartan." Zachary said as he walked passed me, towards the exit.

"Last one out, hit the lights." Commented Ghost as he left the bridge, with Recoil and Wolf close behind.

I followed them out of the bridge and through the ship, careful to avoid the ODSTs that were scrambling around us.

We entered the Drop Bay: a large, kilometer-long room filled with rows upon rows of HEV pods.

I watched as the ODSTs of the 33rd Recon hopped into their assigned HEV pods and strapped in, their comrades sliding the front hatches down and sealing them inside.

"Number 52103. This one is yours, Spartan." Zachary told me as I walked towards him, pointing at the pod directly in front of him.

I gave him a nod and setting my rifles on the small rack built into the inside of the pod. I climbed into the pod, grunting as I tried to fit. My armor took up a lot of space, leaving me with little room to move. I strapped myself into the seat, struggling to get the straps over my chestplate.

Colonel Zachary laughed as he grabbed the hatch to my pod, lowering his head to smile at me. "Just try to stay calm and relax, Spartan."

Zachary closed the hatch and sealed it shut, leaving me alone in the pod with no room to move and an intense feeling of claustrophobia.

"Hey, Vanguard, can you hear me?" I heard Wolf ask through the COMM.

"Yeah."

"Ok, good. How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I've been better."

"Well, try to relax, okay? Your first drop is always the worst." Wolf explained.

"Thanks for the advice."

"And try not to vomit either, or you'll spill your last meal all over the inside of your helmet! Ha ha ha!" Ghost laughed through the COMM.

"We have orders to escort you to the artifact when we get down there, so you'll have to deal with us for a while." Wolf said.

"Great." I sighed, sarcastically.

The monitor built into the side of the HEV pod flickered on, and Colonel Zachary's face appeared within the tiny screen.

"Listen up, ladies! I'm not gonna sit here and give you all a

riveting speech about victory and courage, because I don't give a fuck if you're prepared for this battle or not! We have a job to get done, and we WILL complete it; with, or without you!" Zachary shouted through the monitor, placing his helmet over his head. "NOW GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY DROP BAY!"

Suddenly the floor beneath my pod slid away and I found myself dropping through the open air, a feeling of intense weightlessness overwhelming me and a bullet of dread plunging into my heart.

"AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!" I screamed in panic as my HEV pod dropped through orbit and into the atmosphere, the entire pod rattling and shaking violently as it fell. I could see the dozens of other HEV pods through the window ahead of me as they dropped as well, creating a swarm of gray cocoons in the blue sky.

The pod began to pick up speed as it fell, and orange tongues of searing flames formed at the bottom of the pod. Soon the entire pod was aflame, the armor plating surrounding me preventing the fire from reaching me, but not preventing the heat from causing me to sweat.

"HOW YA DOIN, VANNY?!" I heard Ghost shout through the COMM, over the roar of the rushing air and fire surrounding my pod.

"FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCCCCKKKK YOOOOOUUUUUU!" I shouted back at him, my organs jolting around in unison with the shaking pod.

The landscape below slowly grew bigger and bigger as I plummeted towards it, the pointy summits of the two mountains threatening to skewer me right up the ass.

As we came within five thousand feet of the ground, I began to make out the intense battle that was raging below.

The air around the crevice was engulfed in gun fire and plasma as the two forces clashed, and huge explosions erupted on the ground and in the air; creating large funnels of smoke. Frigates and aircrafts were sending volleys of projectiles at one another, and I watched as a Covenant frigate burst into a column of fire and separated into pieces.

"THREE THOUSAND FEET!" Zachary shouted through the monitor.

As if on cue, the upper exterior panels on the top of my pod separated and spread apart, acting as a sort of drag-type chute and causing my pod to fall at a slower rate. The resulting jolt caused my helmet to smash against the window in front of me, blurring my vision and dizzying me for a few moments.

As we neared the ground, the Covenant troops below began firing at us, hoping to kill us before we could hit the ground. Suddenly a swarm of plasma fire surrounded me, and I jumped in surprise when a stray plasma charge hit the back of my pod and shook the entire thing.

I watched helplessly as a Banshee climbed through the air and weaved through the HEV pods, blowing holes in them with its plasma cannons

and causing them to explode in storms of fire and debris. Thankfully a pelican swooped overhead and sent a missile through the nose of the Banshee, causing it to explode in a cloud of purple alloy and flames.

In seconds the ground ballooned outwards and seemed to swallow me as I can mere meters away from landing, a trio of rockets firing from the bottom of my pod in an attempt to soften my landing.

The pod crashed into the side of one of the two mountains, lodging itself in the hard bedrock. The fierce collision of the landing caused me to black out for a few minutes, before awakening in a fit of grogginess and pain.

I snapped back into focus and lifted my right leg, shoving it forward as I attempted to kick open the front hatch.

The hatch snapped and shot outwards after my third kick, allowing the dusty air to sweep into my pod and cloud my vision. The roar of battle came shortly after the rush of dust, filling my head with the sounds of gunfire and explosions.

I stepped out of the pod and stretched, feeling the nerves come back to alive in my arms and legs. I turned back and grabbed my rifles from off of the small rack, placing the BR55 on my back and shouldering the MA6D.

Ahead of me spanned the crevice, which had been transformed into a massive, chaotic warzone during my drop. Bodies were sprawled across the blood drenched dirt and gunfire filled the air. The two fleets were engaged in a fierce and bloody battle, with both suffering heavy losses.

HEV pods continued to fall like rain from the sky, and I watched in horror as several crashed into the summits of the two mountains, shattering on impact and killing the ODSTs inside in a rush of fire.

I collected my nerves and began to slide down the mountainside, down towards the cluster of HEV pods that lay smoldering on the ground.

I reached the base of the mountain and stepped onto solid ground, sprinting towards the pack of HEV pods ahead.

I reached the pods in time to see Ghost crawl out of one of them, groaning in pain.

I helped him to his feet and retrieved his sniper rifle from the pod before handing it to him. "Don't worry; the first drop is always the worst."

I quickly moved on to open the rest of the pods, leaving Ghost standing and groaning with his rifle held loosely in his hands.

With a grunt I pulled a hatch off of its hinges and threw it aside, reaching in to grab the soldier inside.

Wolf coughed as I pulled him out of the pod, "well hello, beautiful."

I gave him a nod and moved on, ripping off another hatch to another pod beside Wolf's; revealing the lifeless corpse of an ODST inside. The ODSTs limbs were broken and hanging at awkward angles, and his head slumped loosely against his chest; his neck broken in several places.

I moved on, opening the five other pods that were clustered nearby. Out of the five came four ODSTs and Recoil, who now had a large gash on his forehead.

We gathered up all the ammo and weapons we could, preparing to dive right into the midst of the fierce battle. Thirteen more ODSTs that had dropped nearby quickly joined our ranks, deciding that it was better to fight alongside a Spartan than to run into battle alone.

"That's our destination." I told them as I pointed at the large crater almost a full kilometer away. The chaos of battle stood between us and the crater, turning the situation from bad to worst.
"I need to reach that crater at all costs."

The twenty soldiers around me nodded, their faces grim.

"If you can get me there safely, then I can end all of this." I continued, looking into all of their faces.

"Sounds easy enough." Commented Ghost, his mouth wrapped into a wide grin.

I gave him a nod, returning his grin. "Then let's do this. Let's end this war; right here, right now."

"HUUAH!"

* * *

><p>We charged into the ferocity of battle with our throats shouting out battle cries, running with vigor and courage as the world around us exploded into pure chaos. I shoved marines out of the way as I made my way through the fray, keeping my head lowered as mortars dropped nearby and plasma charges raced overhead. Banshees and pelicans would sweep across the battlefield, dropping their ordinances and sending bodies flying into the air like flailing ragdolls. The ground was slippery with blood and my boots constantly crunched the empty shells of bullets. The air was electric with the shouts, cries, screams, curses, and roars of soldiers both human and Covenant alike, and the waves of gunfire seemed to pound deep within my eardrums.</p>

"Right flank!"

"I'm out of ammo!"

"Watch out!"

"Mortar!"

"Cover me!"

"MEDIC!"

The shouts of soldiers filled the air as they screamed their comments with strong voices. I disregarded them all, my mind focused on the one objective that mattered.

Reaching the crater.

I shoved aside a marine and moved through the horde of soldiers, my MA6D ablaze as I fired at anything that moved to intercept me. A grunt running through the chaos of the battlefield was riddled with bullets as it passed by me, and the jackal following close behind it was soon sent airborne by a mighty kick to the face.

I continued forward, lifting my rifle over the heads of the marines nearby and blindly firing at the Covenant soldiers around them.

Wolf and Ghost were both covering my flanks, while Recoil and the other ODSTs tried their best to hold up the rear and cover our advance.

"GET DOWN!" I heard Wolf shout as a flaming phantom fell from the air and crashed into the ground a few meters away from us, instantly killing at least twenty marines and Covenant soldiers in the burning wreckage.

"MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!" I shouted to my band of soldiers as I stood and continued forward, my finger pressed tightly against the trigger of my rifle.

A plasma grenade detonated a yard to my left, showering me with debris and blood as I ducked in response. A few seconds after the detonation two charred and mangled bodies fell out of the air and landed with twin thuds on the ground, smoke rising from their chests.

We ran into a small clearing; blood soaking the ground and bodies lying all around. Ten grunts entered the clearing on the opposite side, with two Elite Minors following close behind.

For an instant no one moved, frozen by shock and unable to act.

"FIRE!" I ordered as I dropped to a crouch, firing at the Covenant soldiers before they could retaliate. The twenty soldiers behind me obeyed and filled the air with their bullets.

The Covenant soldiers jerked around violently as their bodies were ripped apart by the bullets, their blood forming an array of colorful mist as it shot out of their bodies.

As one the soldiers fell to the ground, their lifeless bodies continuing to leak liquids.

I stood and pressed onward, spotting the edge of the crater half a kilometer away.

"MORTAR!" I shouted as I watched the blob of plasma fall towards us.

I dove to the side, hearing the mortar smash into the ground and send

up a dome of heated plasma and flames. Three of my ODSTs were killed instantly in the blast, and a fourth was screaming in agony nearby; his left leg completely melted off.

I gritted my teeth and stood again, rallying the rest of my soldiers and turning to press on.

We were so close.

A stray needler spike shot past my head and dug itself into Ghost's forehead, knocking his head backwards and sending him to the ground.

"GHOST!" I heard Wolf and Recoil shout as they went back to aid their comrade, who stared back at them with a blank, lifeless gaze.

So close.

I left them there and continued onwards, slapping a fresh magazine into my rifle.

I jumped over the ruins of a burning warthog and fired at a pack of jackals as they attempted to flee the battle; killing nineteen of them while the rest got away.

I reloaded again, turning to the side in time to see a plasma grenade attached to a marine's face explode and incinerate both him and the three other marines around him.

A shadow engulfed the entire battlefield, and I looked up to see a massive, UNSC frigate slowly fall from the sky; its hull encased in flames and holes.

The frigate soared overhead and fell towards the mountain directly in front of it, smashing into it head first and exploding with a brilliant flash of intense light. The explosion sent waves of fire and destruction through the hull of the ship, tearing it apart and leaving nothing behind but a massive cloud of smoke and burning debris.

I quickly turned back to the battle and pressed on, a wave of relief overwhelming me as I reached the edge of the crater.

I slide along the wall of the crater and down into the interior, breaking off into a sprint as I raced towards the circular platform in the center. The ancient artifact towered ahead, a soft glow emitting from its frame.

I reached the platform and leaped onto it, my boots stomping onto the metallic floor with a loud thud.

Odin stood near the center of the large platform, his hand placed against the frame of the artifact and his eyes closed. The sight of the Sangheili sent waves of memories and emotions coursing through my mind, and an intense rush of rage and bloodlust overwhelmed my instincts.

This was it.

I activated the MVES system built into my armor, cranking it up to

100%. The intense wave of energy that rushed through my body was both immense and extremely painful, causing me to feel as though my very bones were being melted in a raging fire. My blood felt like lava within my body, sending the vast amounts of energy surging through my body. My heartbeat quickened to nearly triple its normal rhythm, each beat threatening to cause the entire organ to explode. The pain soon became bearable as my body adapted to the pool of energy coursing through it. My armor began to glow red with heat, and tongues of smoke rose from the vents on my arms and legs.

I began to walk towards the Covenant Warlord, throwing my rifles aside and grabbing the two energy swords from my belt. I activated them both, holding them by my side as I neared the Sangheili.

"I've been waiting for you, Demon." Odin said as he removed his hand from the relic and turned to me, his golden armor seeming to absorb the sunlight around him.

"Let's finish this." I told him, quickening my pace.

"I intend to." Replied Odin as he walked forward to meet me, a large energy sword flashing in his left hand.

I sprinted towards the Sangheili and swung an energy sword downward with all my might, watching as he lifted his own sword to deflect my blow. The two weapons collided with a blast of sparks and light, creating a loud sizzling noise as they pressed against each other.

I jabbed forward with my other sword, attempting to impale Odin in the chest with the blade.

The Covenant Warlord sidestepped with amazing speed and launched a flurry of jabs and swings towards me, forcing me to concentrate and use both of my swords to deflect his blows.

I jumped backwards to escape Odin's onslaught and dropped into a defensive stance, waiting for the Sangheili to rush after me again.

Odin reached me in milliseconds, swing fiercely as he tried to cleave my head in two. I ducked under the swing and thrust both of my sides towards his exposed side, my eyes widening in shock as he pounced backwards to avoid being stabbed.

He pressed on again, his swings and thrusts getting faster with every passing second.

I was pushed backwards as I struggled to keep up with his attacks, the air filling with sparks as our swords collided with each other countless times.

I lunged towards him without hesitation, sending my own flurry of attacks at him and forcing him to concentrate on deflecting them. I swung the two swords as fast as I could, but it still wasn't fast enough to break through the Sangheili's guard.

Odin evaded a swing to the head and planted his foot into my chest, knocking the wind out of my lungs and sending me flying backwards. I fell onto the floor with a grunt of pain, my mind in a daze.

I looked up to see Odin crouched above me, his energy sword hurtling down towards my head. I quickly snapped my head to the side to avoid being beheaded, hearing the sword cut through the metal floor mere inches away from my helmet.

I took a wild swing at Odin, forcing him to back away and allowing me to stand. I dropped into a defensive stance, preparing for the Sangheili's next move.

To my surprise the Warlord deactivated his energy sword and threw it to the ground.

"This is pointless, Demon. We are on two different levels of skill. You'll never be able to touch me, let alone slay me; while I, on the other hand, can cut you to ribbons with a mere twist of my wrist. Why keep fighting, demon, when you have absolutely no chance of succeeding?" Odin asked, pity in his voice.

Rage swelled through my mind and I rushed at him again, roaring viciously as I swung my swords towards his chest.

With amazing speed Odin lashed out and evaded my blades, raising his knee and sending it barreling into my gut. He continued with a rapid uppercut to the gut, followed by a punch to the head that made my jaw rattle painfully. He brought back his arm and launched a final fist into my chest, knocking the wind out of my lungs and stopping my heart for a split second.

I was sent hurtling backwards into the air, my body crashing onto the floor a yard away from the Covenant Warlord.

My entire body was aflame with pain and agony as I lay there motionless, blood rushing through my throat and pouring out of my mouth and nose. I coughed violently as I struggled to breathe, my body jerking in spasms of pain. The pain was almost unbearable, and I struggled to stay conscious.

I looked up to find Odin standing above me, his sinister eyes glaring down at me.

"I guess even demons can die." he stated.

I tried to move, but the burning pain prevented my body from responding to my commands.

This was it. I thought, oddly at peace. I was going to die.

Suddenly a loud crack filled the air as a caliber bullet struck Odin in the chest, knocking him back several feet and causing his shields to flare up.

A smoke trail remained in the air, and I followed it to see where the sniper shot had originated from.

A Spartan wearing coal black armor stood at the edge of the platform, his sniper rifle held in one hand; smoke billowing from the barrel. The Spartan's helmet was missing, revealing a ghostly pale face and short, black hair. His eyes were solemn and intimidating; bright yellow pupils with black outlines. They resembled the eyes of a wolf; feral and intense.

Zeke.

"I've been looking for you all day." Zeke said as he walked towards Odin, setting his rifle on the floor.

"Another demon? How fascinating." Odin commented as he walked over to his discarded energy sword, grabbing it with his right hand and activating the blade.

"I'm gonna borrow this, Van." Zeke said as he kneeled beside me, taking one of my energy swords.

He stood and walked towards Odin, swinging the blade in the air as he attempted to become familiar with its weight.

Odin rushed towards Zeke, who surprisingly deflected his swing with relative ease. Their swords clashed in a flash of light and sparks.

The two warriors turned towards each other and lashed out with slashes and jabs, the air heating around them as their swords collided again and again. They twisted and spun around each other with inhuman speed, their swords resembling blurs of bright, blue light.

Odin lunged at Zeke and sent a series of jabs and thrusts at the black-armored Spartan, who backed away slowly as he deflected the vicious assault.

Zeke tried to launch a counter attack at the Sangheili, but his swings grew slower and weaker as his stamina began to fade away.

Odin easily dodged and evaded his swings, weaving through the blurs of blue light with abnormal grace and elegance.

Odin continued to lash out at Zeke, his sword hand moving with amazing speed as he attempted to break the Spartan's guard. Zeke continued to fight back, despite his draining strength.

With astounding grace Odin spun around the Spartan and appeared behind him. The Sangheili swung downwards and slashed Zeke across the back with his blade, cutting through the metal of his armor and burning the skin below.

Zeke shouted out in pain as he dropped his energy sword, his eyes closed tightly and his face morphed into a grimace.

Odin spun again and appeared in front of Zeke, plunging his energy sword through his left bicep and out the other side. Zeke's eyes widened as he lost his breath, grunting loudly as Odin pulled the burning sword out of his chest.

"NO!" I shouted as I watched Zeke fall to his knees, his eyes wide with shock. Steam rose from the twin holes in his chest, and the armor around the wounds glowed red with heat.

"What a disappointment." Odin remarked as he stood in front of Zeke, glaring down at him with dark eyes.

The Covenant Warlord brought his sword down through Zeke's right shoulder, separating the entire arm from his torso. Zeke's right arm fell to the floor with a thud, spilling crimson blood onto the cold metal.

Zeke stared down at his severed arm in complete dread, shock overwhelming his body and preventing him from releasing an ear-splitting scream. After a few moments his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he slumped over; whether he was unconscious or dead, I did not know.

I managed to will my body to move; rising to my feet and slowly making my way towards Odin, my breath coming in short gasps.

The Sangheili Warlord chuckled as he watched me limp towards him. Odin turned and walked back towards the large artifact, completely ignoring me.

Odin placed his hand on the relic and closed his eyes; his hand sending blue cracks of energy across the surface of the artifact. The entire relic began to pulse an intense blue, the air around it warming with energy.

"Witness the Great Journey." Odin told me, lifting his eyes to gaze upon the ancient artifact.

A large, bright beam of intense blue light shot out of the tip of the artifact and into the air, darkening the sky around it and glowing brighter with every passing second.

I watched in terror as the beam of light inflated to form a colossal blue orb, waves of pulsing energy racing across the globe. The light intensified to create small blue plains, mountains, and ruins across the holographic globe, with a large hole forming on one side of the orb.

A holographic map of Spira!

The battle raging around us stopped suddenly as both sides turned to gaze up at the massive globe, their eyes staring into the brilliance of the orb.

A small ray of light rose from a single point on the globe, marking a key location.

Odin examined the massive globe, his eyes staring at the marked location.

"I see. The Ancients have sent us a clue." Odin said, turning away from the artifact. "Auron!"

The white-armored Sangheili warrior appeared by Odin within seconds, bowing slightly. "My liege."

"Order a full retreat. We're leaving." Odin commanded as he turned to the swordsman.

"As you wish, my liege." Auron replied, glaring at me for a split second before turning to do his master's bidding.

A phantom drifted down over the platform and hovered behind Odin.

"Until we meet again, Spartans." Odin said as he gave me a bow, turning and jumping onto the dropship.

"Noâ€|" I wheezed as I reached for the dropship, watching helplessly as it ascended into the air and flew away.

No. Not again.

I limped towards Zeke's motionless body and struggled to pick him up, managing to lift him to his feet. I removed my helmet and held it in my free hand, placing my ear against his mouth and nose.

I waited.

The smallest escape of air: a tiny breeze released from his lips.

He was still alive!

With renewed vigor I limped towards the edge of the platform, propping him against my shoulder as his feet dragged below along below.

I watched as hundreds of Covenant soldiers ran past the platform and towards the massive frigates that rested on the ground above the crater; none of them even acknowledging my existence.

It took me at least ten minutes to carry Zeke up the crater wall and set him down onto the ground beyond, dropping to lie on the ground beside him as I struggled to breathe.

"There they are!" I heard a human voice call out from nearby.

I lifted my head towards the voice, my eyes widening as I gazed upon a large Prowler airship as it hovered over the ground ahead of us.

A man in a coal black uniform was standing in the back of the ship, the symbol of a black and white triangle within a black circle etched onto his shoulder.

ONI.

"Spartan, bring him up here! We can treat his wounds! Hurry, he's bleeding out!" the man shouted to me as he stretched out his hands.

I looked at the ONI agent and then down to Zeke, contemplating what to do.

"You don't have time to think, Spartan! Your friend is close to death! If you want him to live them give him to us! Quickly!" the ONI agent beckoned.

I gave him a nod.

I didn't have any other choice.

I mustered all of my strength and stood, grabbing Zeke and grunting in pain as I lifted him onto the airship.

When I was finished I dropped down to my knees, panting heavily as I watched the agent examine Zeke's wounds.

"Let's go!" the ONI agent shouted to the pilot as he closed the cargo door, turning back and giving me a sinister grin before it slid shut.

I struggled to breathe as I watched the Prowler climb into the air and race away, disappearing in the burning sunlight.

I slumped back down to the ground, closing my eyes as I allowed myself to drift into unconsciousness.

* * *

><p>I awoke to find myself sitting in the back of a pelican, with Deseron's worried eyes staring into mine.</p>

"He's awake! Vanguard? Vanguard?! What the hell happened down there?!" Deseron asked as he stared at me, his eyes filled with confusion and concern.

I lowered my eyes and turned my head, looking out of the back of the pelican and at the landscape beyond.

Our pelican was flying away from the crevice, accompanied by dozens of other pelicans and falcons. I could scarcely see the silhouettes of over five hundred marines as they retreated through the grass fields below us, towards the two frigates that were waiting to extract them from the area.

I found myself staring at the distant blue orb that hung over the ancient artifact, a single spear of light marking a single location on the holographic map.

"W-whatâ€¦is it?" I asked Deseron, mustering the strength to point at the orb.

He looked, his face growing darker. "You mean what's being marked on the map? We didn't know at first, until Gizmo helped us pinpoint the coordinates."

Deseron turned to look at me, his eyes filled with unease. "It's Eden, Vanguard; the map is pointing towards Eden, the UNSC capital city on Spira."

I let that sink in.

I had failed yet again, and it looked as though the war for Spira was just beginning.

I turned to look back at the distant orb of light, dreading the unknown future that lied ahead.

* * *

><p>- End of Section Two

25. III: A Song of Winter

**Halo: Vanguard **

Book 3

Legacies

"_For a hero to rise, a city must fall."—

* * *

><p>Chapter One: A Song of Winter

**VANGUARD **

September 7, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ En Route to UNSC Fortress City Eden. Troy Province, Spira.

The storms of winter had come. Small orbs of ice were falling through the bitter air, covering the vast landscape in waves of sleet and brightened snow. Luscious fields of wheat and grass were dipped in seas of white fluff; their icy tips poking up from the white. Cold winds caused the hail of snow to swirl and twist through the gray sky, and fierce clouds stretched for hundreds of miles over the white world: behemoths clouding a burning god. The sun was lost within the stormy skies of Spira; its gentle light protruding through the army of gray with weakened vigor. The world below was dim and darkened, and the howl of the wind sent a fearful message sweeping across the land:

Winter had come.

Armies of white orbs rampaged into the pelican and twisted around like savages, forming small tornadoes and hurricanes as they swept through the cargo bay. The howling winds were close behind, screaming into my ears and covering my face with droplets of water and snow.

I wrapped the heavy fur cloak around my shoulders and tucked my arms into my sides, lowering my head and letting out a burst of vaporous air. I closed my eyes and struggled to keep warm; feeling the hairs on my neck and arms standing on end as my body began to shake from the bitter cold.

I found myself longing for the warmth of my armor; disregarding the thought almost instantly.

A few days after the Battle of the Crevice, my MJOLNIR Mark VI armor had completely shut down and died, finally succumbing to the years of damage and scars it had endured. Technicians reported that repairing the armor was impossible, and that it would take billions to replace the plating and electronics within it. I had unwillingly handed my broken armor and helmet to the techies, sorrow building in my gut as I realized that they would be scrapped.

It was for the best. Shortly after the Battle of the Crevice I had been ordered to see a doctor, regarding my wounds and injuries. The doctor was kind enough to inform me that I was dying, and not from my

recent injuries. Apparently, the Nanomachines inside of my body had drained most of the energy from my muscles and organs; a dire consequence brought on by my abuse of the MVES system built into my armor. The doctor had said that my body was working overtime just to keep me up and running, and that I would begin to grow tired and weak within the coming months. I had asked him how much time I had left, and he had hesitated before answering:

Six months.

That was a shock to me. My life now had a harsh deadline, and I was prepared to spend my final days in the midst of battle; with my arms wrapped around Odin's neck.

A fierce gust of snowy wind rushed into the cargo bay and covered my cloak in white fuzz, forcing me to tighten the cloak even more and breathe in the icy air. I could feel my lungs grow cold as I swallowed in the bitter air, and exit my mouth and nose as clouds of gray air.

I hadn't seen Deseron or my teammates since our departure from the crevice, and I was more than eager to reunite with them again. No one knew where Zeke had been taken or if he was still alive; he had seemed to disappear from the world itself along with the ONI agents that I had given him to. I was holding on to the hope of seeing him again in this world, and not the next.

"Uh, I can close the cargo door if you're getting cold, sir." Came the muffled voice of the pilot as he spoke through the pelican's speakers, his voice barely rising over the roar of the howling world.

"It's fine." I replied, raising my head and looking out at the white canvas outside. "I like the cold."

"Y-yes sir. We're entering Eden Airspace, sir; ETA five minutes." The pilot reported before growing silent.

I nodded to myself and let out another stream of vapor, my hopes rising as we neared our destination.

My friends and teammates were waiting down below; preparing for one of the largest battles in UNSC history.

It had been over a month since our battle against the Covenant in the massive canyons of the Storm-Crest Province, and Spira had drifted into a tense, ominous peace. There had been no skirmishes or direct encounters with the Covenant since their retreat from the canyons, and both sides had went their separate ways: UNSC forces rallying in Eden, while the Covenant fleet sat in wait within the Cera Province. The weeks that followed were filled with nervous silence and anxiety as the UNSC began to prepare for the large-scale Covenant attack on Eden that they knew would inevitably come. Fleet Admiral Hawke, now residing in Washington DC back on Earth, had immediately ordered additional reinforcements to head for Spira, and three thousand soldiers had arrived on the planet in the following hours.

Over ten thousand marines and soldiers now occupied Eden, with at least seven thousand more expected to reach the city within the coming weeks. Over a dozen Companies and Divisions were spread across

the massive city, with seven Frigates and three Destroyers patrolling the airspace. Mercenaries and elite soldiers from across the Human Colonies had traveled across the galaxy to participate in the War For Spira; all of them more than eager to fight in the biggest and bloodiest war of the decade. The streets of Eden were filled with ignorant and anxious soldiers waiting for the fires of battle, and to quench their undying thirsts with the blood of their enemies.

There was more than enough blood to sate them all.

A few weeks ago, UNSC soldiers on patrol in the Cera Province had reported witnessing the dawn sky being cluttered by shadowed silhouettes as over fifty Covenant Frigates shot out of slipspace and entered the planet's atmosphere, with at least five cruisers close behind. The soldiers swore to seeing over fifty thousand Covenant soldiers standing in formation across the province, their glimmering purple reflecting the morning dawn and setting the plains ablaze with light.

It became gravely clear that we weren't the only ones receiving reinforcements.

The strange artifact Odin had uncovered in the crater had marked Eden as an area-of-interest, which meant that the Covenant Warlord would try his hardest to burn the city to the ground and uncover its secrets.

We had to be ready.

We had to be willing to fight; to die.

Eden was our last stand.

The pelican banked left and sent a forceful rush of wind into the cargo bay, causing the icy breeze to bite at my face. The snowy hills and slopes seemed to slide along below us, giving me a fierce surge of vertigo. The pelican swirled around and began to stabilize, causing the vastness of Eden to pan into view down below.

The fortress-city was enormous: three miles of pure, titanium-A encased the entire city in a massive wall; standing fifty feet into the air and wrapping around Eden in a massive half-circle. Steel buildings and skyscrapers formed the bulk of the city, creating perfect rows and formations along the paved roads. The UNSC Command Center stood at the far end of the city: a large, steel facility surrounded by concrete walls and watchtowers.

The massive, military city of Eden was separated into three districts; East District, West District, and North District. Each district rested behind one of the three main gates into the isolated city, with each gate being named after their respected districts. Three large, concrete roads led through each of the gates and into the Silent Plains beyond, stretching for miles and connecting Eden with the other cities in the Troy province.

The north road twisted for over seventy miles through the silent plains, eventually connecting Eden with the trade city of Roark.

The west road followed the Talos mountain and snaked itself between the chains of mountains to the far west, coming out the other side

and reaching the snowy city of Arid.

The Talos River snaked across the plains near the east gate, spanning half a mile in length. Its deep blue water had solidified into a floor of pale ice, with slithering cracks stretching across its white surface. The Iron Bridge rose over the river: an enormous structure formed of thick, iron pillars and intersecting beams. The concrete road raced across the bridge and over the river, stretching on for fifty miles before breaking into the forests of the Storm-Crest province.

The fabled Talos Mountain rose over a thousand feet into the air behind the city, with its snowy, icy cliffs forming a solid backbone for the capital city. A long, narrow pass crafted behind a stone wall stretched across the mountains cliff-face, forming the infamous "Blood Pass."

The entire city was covered in fresh snow, and the bitter cold caused sheets of ice to cover the wall and icicles to form under the building windows. The chilling breeze was ominous and silent; the hail of constant snow racing around the city alongside the fierce wind.

I cursed as a sudden jolt shook the aircraft, causing droplets of water to fall from the ceiling and explode unto my face and shoulders. The pelican soared over the massive wall surrounding the city and into the jungle of snowy buildings beyond. I looked down to watch the squads of soldiers move through the streets below, their hoods over their heads and fur cloaks wrapped around their bodies. Warthogs and tank moved through the snow as well, their tires and treads leaving trails behind them that revealed the wet pavement below. Within seconds the road was covered in a white sheet again.

The pilot flew the pelican over a large aircraft hangar located in the center of East District, easing up on the controls and allowing the ship to slowly descend onto the circular landing pad below us. Technicians on the ground waved flashing lights at the pilot as he landed, trying to keep the pelican from accidentally colliding with the other aircraft on the airfield.

Another jolt surged through the ship as we touched down, and I quickly unstrapped and stood; holding the cloak across my chest to keep it from blowing away in the bitter breeze.

"Good morning! Welcome to Eden, Spartan!" a Colonel shouted to me as I stepped out of the pelican. The Colonel's face was shrouded in a wool hood and goggles, and a black scarf was tied across his face.

I gave him a nod, throwing my own hood over my head. Within seconds my hood was covered in snow and water; the howling wind continuing to rip at my cloak.

Damn it was cold.

"I've been ordered to escort you to the command center! Admiral Briggs wants to meet with you as soon as possible!" the Colonel shouted above the howl of the wind.

I gave him another nod and followed behind him, gritting my teeth as

my feet fought against the bitter wind.

The Colonel jumped into a parked warthog and grabbed onto the wheel, waving for me to get into the passenger seat. I did, and within seconds we were driving through the wide street, blending in perfectly with the squads and vehicles that moved around us.

The warthog shook constantly as it followed the white roads, snow morphing into water as it fell on the hood and frame. I watched the people around us in cold silence, my eyes darting from side to side as I scouted for familiar faces. I found none.

We crossed an intersection packed with warthogs and Scorpions and hurried through, the purr of the engine drowning out the shouts and conversations of the marines around us.

We passed a group of marines standing around an intersection, smiles on their faces as they told a news reporter about their experiences in the war. They waved and shouted at the small camera sphere as it buzzed around the reporter, who nodded and grinned as he held a microphone towards the soldiers.

We continued on.

We made our way towards the far end of the fortress-city, where a wall of thick concrete stood before the Command Center.

The Colonel led the warthog through the barred gate and into the courtyard beyond. The blackened trunks of trees stood in rows on both sides of the paved road, their twisted and gnarled limbs naked and stretching into the air. The chilled breeze covered their arms with waves of snow, and a white blanket of frost covered the meadow of roses and daisies. A stolen statue of a Spartan stood in the center of the courtyard amidst a giant fountain; a granite super soldier with his hand stretched out to touch the burning sun. Marines patrolled the courtyard constantly, their faces hidden behind scarves and helmets and MA5B rifles in their hands.

The Colonel stopped the warthog when we reached the large pavilion that rose into a large granite staircase; the large steps leading up towards the Command Center. The enormous facility cast a dark shadow upon the entire courtyard, flooding the dead trees and the white land with ominous blackness.

"This is it. The Brigadier General will take you the rest of the way. Farewell, Spartan." The Colonel said as he turned to me, giving me a slight nod.

I returned the gesture and climbed out of the warthog, my boots stomping onto the granite with a wet thud. I gave the Colonel a wave as he turned the vehicle and drove away, back towards the barred gate.

I wrapped the fur cloak tightly around my chest and turned, heading up the large steps and towards the Command Center. The stairs were big and polished, their surface melting the white snow as it attempted to settle atop it.

I reached the top of the stairs shivering and sneezing, lifting my head to see an old friend beaming down at me.

"It's about damn time! I've been waiting here for ten minutes!" spoke Brigadier General James Deseron as he watched me walk forward, a wide smile on his face.

Deseron wore a set of black battle armor, with a heavy fur cloak wrapped around his torso and arms. A small, brown beard had grown around his mouth and chin, and his short hair was wet with snow and frost.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, my friend." I told him as I shook his hand, smiling.

"Don't apologize to me; Briggs is the one you need to worry about. She's been expecting you all morning, and she's not the patient type." Deseron warned, his smile unfaltering.

Shit.

"Come on, everyone's waiting inside." Deseron said as he ushered me forward. "No need to keep them waiting any longer."

* * *

><p>I stepped into the War Room hastily; droplets of water streaming down my cloak and hair and splashing onto the metal floor.</p>

The room was small: a steel, oval table sat at the center of the dim room; with dozens of papers and maps scattered across its surface. Medals, awards, and monitors adorned the walls, and a large window was placed at the far end of the room; with the white wastes displayed beyond it.

Three people stood around the table, their heads turned towards me. General "Armstrong" Rogers stood at the far left, his stern eyes staring into mine fiercely. He was garbed in the gray suit of a General, with glimmering medals and awards emblazoned on his chest.

A woman with long, golden hair stood with pride at the head of the table, her striking blue eyes peering at me. She was beyond beautiful, with locks of blonde hair and an amazing body. She wore a cloak of white fur over a set of battle armor, and a ceremonial sword was sheathed at her side.

The last person standing around the table was an old man in a crisp, blue suit; his white hair covered by a matching hat. He was skinny and pale, with wrinkled leathery skin and glassy eyes. He held a black cane in his right hand, and a Medal of Honor was displayed on his chest.

"You are late, Spartan leader." Spoke the old man, his head shaking slightly as he glared at me with sunken eyes.

"My apologies, Admiral Briggs." I told him, giving a swift nod.

"I," spoke up the woman, her eyes filled with fiery irritation, "am Admiral Briggs."

Shit.

"Again, my apologies." I managed to say as Deseron and I walked to the table, placing our hands on the cold surface.

Admiral Briggs glared at me for a long moment, her burning eyes sending plumes of unease through me. Finally she lowered her eyes and examined the map before her, putting her focus back to the task at hand.

"Now that we're all here, we can begin." Briggs stated as she glanced at the five commanding officers around her. "General Cutter: would you be so kind as to inform us of the situation."

The old General gave her a nod, his weary face and sunken eyes displaying his old age. "Of course."

My eyes widened as I realized who he truly was; how could I have been so naïve?

General James Cutter was one of the most renowned soldiers to ever participate in the Human-Covenant War, and also the Commanding Officer of the infamous UNSC colony ship *Spirit of Fire*. He was involved in the fable Harvest Campaign, and had even helped in the battle for Arcadia. His ship and its crew had survived to fight through the fiercest battles of the war. Supposedly, Cutter had uncovered an unknown Forerunner Shield World during his travels, and had even stopped an Elite Arbiter from gaining the knowledge within. Long story short, the tale ended with the *Spirit of Fire* drifting through unknown space, with no working slipspace drive and its crew locked in cryo sleep.

Back in 2557, a group of rebel pirates had discovered the *Spirit of Fire* somewhere along the edge of the Milky Way, and had the bright idea of looting the silent ship for anything valuable. The ship's AI had awakened its crew and they sprang into action; killing the pirates and using their ships to jump back to earth. Three days later Cutter had walked straight into Lord Hood's office, bringing with him tales of war, Forerunners, and Flood. He and his crew were awarded with the Medal of Honor, and he had been granted a retirement fit for a king.

Even Hood was shocked when Cutter traded in his retirement for a promotion to General, stating that he'd rather continue serving his land and his nation than sitting in an empty mansion with rats as company.

Cutter looked around the room, his sunken eyes surveying us. "A storm is coming. It is a storm of ships and soldiers; all under the tyrannical grip of a gold Sangheili warlord."

Odin.

"We believe his goal is to lay siege to Eden, and uncover the Forerunner artifact that is supposedly hidden underneath the city. He will attack with all his might and crush everything in his sight. His army is vast and powerful; almost three times larger than our own. If we are not prepared to fight till the very end, then this storm will reduce this entire city and everyone inside it to ashes." Cutter explained, his face grim.

"We do not know if the artifact under our feet exists or what its function may be if it does, but we fear it may have something to do with the Halo Installation that hangs near the planet. If that is the case, then we may be facing yet another threat to humanity and all sentient life in the Milky Way." Admiral Briggs added, her eyes upon us.

"We've done our best to prepare for the coming fire, but there's only so much we can do and time is running short. All available companies and battalions throughout Spira have been ordered to head for the city, and additional reinforcements are on their way from the Outer Colonies. Odin's armada is slowly making its way through the Troy province and towards the city, and we believe that he will reach our gates within the week." Cutter continued.

"Odin faces resistance in the city of Roark, which is over a hundred miles away from Eden and directly in his path. Roark will take a few days for him to siege and sack, which should give us enough time to hunker down and prepare for his arrival at Eden." Briggs interrupted, placing her finger on the black dot on the map below her.

"We believe Odin will put his trust in attacking Eden head on, with his forces charging forward in powerful waves of brute strength and power. The Talos Mountain prevents him from flanking the city, which will help further his motivation to attack from the front. If our theories are correct and he chooses to use this battle strategy, then we may have a chance to survive his campaign." Cutter explained.

"Odin may have a large attack force and strength, but we have the advantage of terrain and defense. Ultimately; since Odin is attacking and we are defending, it automatically gives us a major advantage. His army will make careless mistakes and blunders as they attempt to push into the city, while we will remain strong and organized behind the great walls." Briggs added, a grin appearing on her face.

"Even with the advantage of cover; we're still screwed. Judging by the amount of soldiers Odin has under his command as of now, we could be defending the city for months. There's no way we could fight for that long without succumbing to his strength and losing the city." Armstrong said as he gazed at the map, his hand scratching his chin.

"It's possible." Briggs protested, moving her hand to point at a solid black line that stretched across the Talos River on the map. "We'll constantly be receiving supplies, ammunitions, and reinforcements from cities within the Storm-Crest province; as long as we keep the Iron Bridge standing. Also, supplies will be coming in from the west road as well; from the distant city of Arid. As long as we keep those two roads protected and safe, than we should be able to hold out. They're our lifelines." Briggs replied.

Armstrong gave her a timid nod, contemplating her words.

"There is, however, another problem." General Cutter said, turning to Briggs. "Admiral Hawke has ordered all air support to be redirected from the city and back into orbit; to assist in keeping the Covenant ships from gaining control of the surrounding airspace. If the Covenant were to gain control of the skies, then he would be able to successfully isolate the entire planet from incoming UNSC supplies

and reinforcements arriving from the outer colonies."

"So not only are we dealing with fifty thousand Covenant soldiers knocking at our front door, but we have to fend them off without any kind of air support?!" Armstrong gasped in disgust.

"I'm afraid so."

"That's bloody impossible! There's no way in hell we could hope to survive without air cavalry!" Armstrong snorted, crossing his arms.

"It doesn't matter if it's possible or not, Robert. It's our duty to protect this city, and I would rather die fighting than watch it turn into burning ruins. If you'd rather abandon your duty and run like a coward back to Earth, then by all means, Robert; go." Briggs told him, calmly.

For a split second the two commanders glared at each other, their stares seeming to heat the entire room in fierce ferocity.

With a sigh Armstrong backed down, shaking his head.

"Now." Cutter continued, disregarding Armstrong's quiet mumbling. "Our defensive strategy begins with securing the three main gates and making sure that they stay under our control. We'll need to assign a General to command each district and their corresponding gates; along with the companies assigned to defend each section of the city." Cutter explained.

Briggs lifted her head to peer at Deseron, "Brigadier General Deseron: you will be placed in charge of maintaining control of the east gate and district. Nova Delta will be assigned to defend your district, along with Nova Hotel."

Deseron gave a nod.

Briggs turned to me, sending a surge of unease through my spine. "Spartan IV Vanguard-032: you will be promoted to Brigadier General, and placed in charge of the north gate and district. You will be in command of the 109th Expeditionary and Nova Charlie. General Armstrong will serve as your second-in-command."

My eyes widened in complete shock.

Brigadier General?! That was a pretty big promotion.

"Uh, y-yes sir! T-thank you, sir!" I managed to say, giving the Admiral a salute.

Armstrong snorted in disgust; no doubt angered at the thought of being ordered around by a Spartan.

Briggs sighed and stood, her mane of golden hair resting upon the white fur on her shoulders. We stood straight as well, our eyes upon the revered Admiral.

"The fate of Eden rests on our shoulders. The continuation of human history depends on what the five of us do in the coming days. It's up to us to defend this city; and humanity as well." She sighed, her

blue eyes gazing back at us. "That's a pretty huge burden, and I'll be the first to admit that I'm afraid. I don't know the future. I don't know if we were destined to succeed or fail. But I know that we have to try."

We all gave her a nod in agreement.

"You're dismissed for now. Go; rest, relax. Prepare for the coming fire. I'll call you when I need you. I'll call you, when Eden needs you." Briggs concluded as she gave us a salute.

We returned the gesture, before turning to leave the Admiral to her thoughts.

Deseron turned and made for the door, stopping beside me and putting a hand on my shoulder. "It's great to see you again, Van. Stop by the Rusty Maiden later; I'll treat you to a drink or two."

I gave him a nod, watching as he turned and left the room.

I was the last to leave the room, glancing back at the Admiral as she stared at the map before her.

I turned back around to find Armstrong standing in front of me, his stern eyes glaring at me.

"There's a storm coming, Spartan." He said with an intimidating voice. "And I don't think you're ready for it."

* * *

><p>I found Gizmo and Hercules sitting atop the north wall.</p>

The two Spartans were gazing out at the sea of green plains beyond the wall; their golden visors shining in the sun's light.

"I thought I'd find you here." I grinned as I walked towards them, my hands gripping my fur cloak tightly. The howling wind struck fierce and hard, pelting my face with snow and water and sending chills through my body.

Hercules was the first to look back at me, his red armor covered in snow and water.

He chuckled behind his helm and jumped down from the ledge, moving forward and rustling his armored hand through my hair.

"Agh! Stop it!" I protested as he laughed.

"It's about time you got here; we've been waiting for hours!" he said, removing his hand from my head.

"Van! Bloody hell, I almost didn't recognize you without your armor!" Gizmo shouted in joy as he jumped down to greet me, his green armor glittering in the sunlight.

"Of course I am." I told him, grinning. "How have you guys been?"

"Miserable." Hercules groaned.

"Miserable?" I asked him, confused.

"The war here has received a lot of public attention. Now that everyone's gathered here in Eden, the press has swarmed in as well; like moths to a bright light." Gizmo sighed.

"And it's not every day that the press gets to interview actual Spartan super soldiers!" Hercules explained.

I was beginning to see the problem.

"They've been trying to 'interview' us for days. We've been trying our best to hide and avoid being seen, but they're bloody persistent." Hercules exclaimed.

"This is basically the only place we can go to escape the cameras and news reporters." Gizmo concluded, glancing around the massive wall.

"Oh. Well I'd hate to see you killed by the press instead of Covies." I told them jokingly.

"Yeah, us too." Hercules replied.

"Deseron says hi, by the way."

"He's still around?! Damn, that's one tough son of a bitch!" Hercules exclaimed in surprise.

Deseron had been fighting ever since the beginning of the war, and I've personally witnessed him getting severely injured.

"Yeah. And I've been promoted to Brigadier General. We've been put in charge of defending the north gate."

"Brigadier General? Damn." Hercules said as he turned to sit on the ledge again; overlooking the vast landscape beyond.

I did the same, allowing my feet to dangle above the towering wall as I sat beside the red armored Spartan. The fierce breeze was especially strong up here, and my body was constantly being hit by snow and slush.

"Any news about Zeke?" Gizmo asked as he sat beside me, his voice grim.

Zeke had been missing since the Battle of the Crevice; when I had handed his mangled body over to an ONI Agent. We had heard no news regarding him, his condition, or his whereabouts. He was MIA, and I was beginning to fear that I would never see him again.

"No." I told him.

* * *

><p>"Lord Hood is coming to Spira."<p>

"W-what?!" I stammered in shock, staring back at Deseron as he chuckled and took a drink from the glass of scotch in front of

him.

The Rusty Maiden was filled with marines, mercenaries, and drunks; their voices loud and their drunken laughter even louder. Glasses filled with beer, vodka, scotch, whisky, and ale were placed in abundance on every table, with empty and broken glasses cluttering the floor and the bar counter. The barkeep shouted orders to the waiters as they rushed through the bar, carrying pitchers of booze to the drunken men around.

"It's true. Briggs received word of it a few hours ago." Deseron reassured, leaning back in his chair.

"What the fuck is wrong with him?! We're almost on the brink of total war and he chooses NOW to pay a visit to the city where shit is gonna go down?!" I shook my head, trying to clear my grogginess. The vodka was starting to affect me.

"I must admit: it's one of the stupidest things he could ever do. He's going to address the soldiers tomorrow, and they plan on having a huge feast and celebration to honor his arrival in the city." Deseron continued, smiling.

"What the fuck! A feast?! A celebration?! On the eve of battle?! What the fuck is wrong with everyone?!" I exclaimed, taking another gulp of vodka.

"Briggs had the same reaction." Deseron replied.

"And what happens when Odin arrives during Hood's little speech and drops a plasma mortar straight into his ass?!" I asked rhetorically.

Deseron laughed. "Admiral Hawke is coming as well, and their bringing an entire battalion along with them."

"Well at least they're bringing us a present." I mumbled.

"Yeah. Speaking of presents: when are you gonna get a new set of shiny, sparkling white armor?" Deseron asked as he drank again.

"I don't know; I was hoping that Briggs would provide me with another setâ€|what the hell does armor have to do with presents?!" I asked him in disbelief.

"I don't know, man; I'm drunk! Ha ha ha!" Deseron laughed loudly, taking another gulp of ale.

I grinned. Dumbass.

A fight had broken out across the bar, and I turned to watch as a drunk marine smashed a bottle of whiskey into the face of another. The bar erupted in shouts and whoots as the two marines brawled across the table and the floor, trading punches and kicks and spilling beer and blood on the floor.

"This is what happens when you give soldiers too much free timeâ€|" I sighed, shaking my head.

"Aye! We're here to fight the Covies, not each other!" Deseron

shouted towards the marines, downing another gulp of ale.

The fat barkeep grabbed a shotgun from under the counter and fired it into the ceiling, creating a loud boom that echoed throughout the room. Everyone stopped moving, their eyes wide as they turned towards the barkeep.

The two drunken marines let go of each other and stood, blood covering their armor and faces.

Within seconds the bar was back to the way it had been before, as if the brawl had never happened.

Deseron chuckled, turning back to our table and lifting his bottle to his mouth. He stopped before taking a drink, his eyes widened in shock as he peered behind me.

"It's Vanguard, right?" said an unknown soldier behind me.

"Yeah, who's asking?" I answered, not bothering to turn around.

There was a pause, and then the soldier spoke again.

"You were in a city called Haven a little over a month ago. Do you remember?" he said, moving from behind me and to my side.

He was clearly an elite mercenary; with blood red armor, a grizzled black beard, menacing eyes glassy from alcohol, and a muscular figure. A golden sun was painted onto his chest plate, and a M6D magnum was held at his side.

Two other mercenaries dressed in similar armor were standing at his flanks, their hands gripping their magnums as they glared at me coldly.

Oh noâ€¦

I turned to the lead merc, leaning back in my chair. "Yeah, I remember. What of it?"

The mercenary stared at me with fiery eyes and raised his hand, placing the barrel of the magnum directly between my eyes.

"You killed a mercenary back in Haven. Do you remember his name?" the merc asked with a growl.

Aw fuck.

"I do. His name was Rohan. Not a day goes by that I don't regret ending his life." I told the merc truthfully. Rohan's death had been a complete accident; I had lost control of myself and let power take control of me.

The mercenary laughed hysterically, spit flinging from his lips. "That's fucking hilarious! I never knew Spartans could feel regret!"

His two comrades shared in his laughter, their weapons still pointed at my skull.

The merc lowered his head to glare at me again, his finger twitching around the magnum's trigger. "Rohan was my little brother. He was my flesh and blood, and we have one golden rule where I come from: we don't let the souls of our family rest unavenged--"

With lightning speed I jabbed my right hand forward, grabbing the barrel of the magnum and pushing it backwards with tremendous force. The barrel made a clicking sound and detached from the frame of the magnum, sliding off of the firearm and falling to the floor.

I immediately lifted out of my chair and thrust my right hand into the merc's neck, pushing his windpipe back into his throat and causing him to gag in pain. The merc fell to one knee and grabbed his neck with his hands, his eyes wide with pain and fear as he struggled to breath. A swift kick to the chest sent him sprawling across the floor, arms flailing as he knocked over a nearby table.

The two remaining mercenaries finally realized what was happening and opened fire, their pistols barking loudly as fire flashed from the barrels.

I ducked and rolled to the left, hearing the scream of bullets as they flew by me and struck the floor. I reached up and grabbed the bottom of our table, grunting as I tipped it over and caused it to strike the floor on its side; forming a circular wall of cover between the mercenary's bullets and my armorless body.

Deseron sprang into action, shouting curses as he lunged at one of the mercenaries, a half empty bottle of ale gripped in his hand. He brought the bottle down hard on the merc's head, causing it explode on impact and separate into a cloud of glass and booze.

The merc grunted in surprise as his head swayed back and forth, his eyes rolling into the back of his head as ale dripped down his scarred face. He fell to the floor in a heap; unconscious.

By the time the second merc fell to the floor the entire bar was ablaze in energy and action as the drunks cheered on the fight and started ones of their own; transforming the small bar into an all out brawl. Fists and bottles flew everywhere as drunken marines and mercs joined the frays around them, aiding their drunken comrades and beating the bloody shit out of their opponents. The barkeep cursed and shouted in defiance as he witnessed the fighting in the bar, but was quickly quieted by a bottle of whiskey that was thrown at his head.

The third mercenary tried to jump over the overturned table and shoot me in the face, but instead let out a cry of surprise when three drunken marines jumped onto his back and pulled him to the ground. The marines laughed and taunted as they launched fists and kicks into the mercs body, their eyes wild with drunken flair.

I turned towards Deseron, my eyes widening as I watched him punch a drunk marine in the face. The marine fell instantly, his bottle of scotch rolling towards Deseron's feet.

"T-thank ya fer der refill, m-mate!" burped Deseron drunkenly as he picked up the bottle and began to lift it to his lips. Milliseconds later he was being tackled by another drunken soldier, his eyes wide

as he watched his bottle of scotch fall and shatter against the dirty floor.

I stood and began to run towards him, cursing inwardly as I watched him brawl with the drunk.

"Get off him, ya drunken git!" I growled at the drunk as I grabbed him by the chest plate and threw him into the air; his body crashing into a table filled with empty bottles and food.

I turned to help Deseron to his feet, realizing that the Brigadier General was already on his feet and trying to wrestle a bottle of red wine from a waiter.

I cursed and went after my friend, ducking under projectiles and shoving drunken buffoons out of my way.

I reached the Brigadier General and pulled him away from the frightened waiter.

"Hey! Damn it Van, get off of me!" he shouted as he struggled under my grasp.

"Uh, I'm sorry; he's had way too much to drink." I confessed to the frightened waiter, giving her a nervous smile.

She squealed and ran away, taking cover behind the counter.

BOOM!

The fighting stopped immediately. No one moved. All eyes were turned towards the door; where the rifle shot had come from.

General Armstrong stood in the doorway, his MA5B held in his left hand; the barrel pointing towards the roof and a trail of smoke rising from its depths. Six UNSC marines stood behind him, their rifles raised.

"Lieutenant General!" most of the drunken marines shouted in fearful unison, their bodies snapping into awkward salutes. They all stood and faced the General, their eyes wide with absolute terror.

Armstrong looked throughout the room, his menacing eyes unwavering and intense.

"This is beyond unacceptable behavior for marines." He said to the soldiers, a deep frown on his face. "You have all brought great shame to your names and to your army."

He began to walk through the room, making sure to glare into the eyes of any soldiers that were too brave or drunk to avoid his gaze. "We are days away from the fight of our lives, and this is how you spend your time? Is this how you prepare for the battle of your lives?! Shameful."

The room was deathly quiet.

"I want every last one of you stripped naked and standing outside the

city gates in two minutes! You're running ten miles across the silent plains with nothing but your own filth and shame to keep you warm." Armstrong commanded, his voice growing louder with each word.

No one moved.

"GET MOVING!" he shouted in a voice so loud and threatening that it sent chills down my spine.

In an instant soldiers were running past me and fleeing from the bar, their armor and clothing falling to the floor as they stripped nude.

Armstrong turned towards Deseron and me, as if noticing us for the first time. He glared down at us for a few moments, his face emotionless.

I sighed and led Deseron towards the door, lowering my head as I passed by the Lieutenant General.

"It doesn't surprise me in the slightest that you would stoop so low, Spartan." Armstrong stated coldly as I passed him.

I disregarded the General, helping a dazed and groaning Deseron along as we walked towards the door.

"Don't listen to him, Jack. He's full of bullshit." Spoke a familiar voice to my left.

I turned, spotting a lone soldier as he sat at a table near the door, a bottle of rum held loosely in his left hand.

The soldier was wearing a polished suit of gray Mark VI MJOLNIR Armor, his helmet tucked under his left shoulder. He had a young face, with tan skin and short, blonde hair. He had a grin on his familiar face as he drank the rum, and his green eyes were gazing down at me. A long, red scar twisted over his left eye.

"What the fuckâ€|" I muttered as I stared at the lone Spartan, my eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

"But they're all full of bullshit, aren't they. Commanders, Leaders, Warlords, Officers. Fucking humans. They're all full of bullshit." The gray-armored Spartan said as he grinned, leaning back in his chair.

I continued to stare at him, unable to comprehend what I was seeing.

There was no way.

There was no fucking way.

"They don't understand us, Jack. They never will." Tiger told me as he grinned, his green eyes filled with pride and arrogance. "We live in two different worlds."

Chapter Two: A Creed of War

**VANGUARD **

September 7, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ UNSC Fortress-City Eden. Troy Province, Spira.

It was noon, and the sun had managed to break free of the fierce, gray clouds. Its rays brightened the snowy world below, casting the white plains in shining light. The storm of snow continued to rage through the skies; the roaring winds carrying the white specks and the bitter cold across the land.

We sat along the edge of the north gate, overlooking the sea of white beyond and the burning sun hanging over the horizon. The north road shot out of the gate and battled through the silent plains: a solid black line twisting through the realm of snowy white.

"You were dead." I told the large, gray-armored Spartan who sat beside me.

"Is that what they told you?" Tiger asked, a grin on his face. His hair was covered in snow, yet he refused to don his helmet.

"That's what we believed."

He chuckled, turning back to look at the snowy plains.

Spartan IV Tiger-077 had been killed along with the rest of Valor Team back in 2554, when their mission to assassinate a UNSC Commander had ended in failure and disaster.

I was waiting for him to explain how the fuck he had survived all these years, but that conversation never came.

"Tigerâ€|what happened? How are you alive; how are you even here?!" I finally asked, my curiosity peaking.

It was like he had been resurrected from the dead!

Was I talking to a ghost?

Would I imagine Selene sitting beside me if I turned my head?

Tiger took a few moments before answering, his face darkening. "The past is irrelevant. We live in the now, and that's all that matters."

"But the past reveals the truth behind our now; our present, our future. It shows us the journey that leads to the present. Without the past, there is no now." I pressed on.

He turned to stare at me, his eyes tired and saddened. "How is everyone, Jack?"

"What? Uh, they're fineâ€|Selene's gone, though; and Zeke is missingâ€|"

His face darkened, and I could see the wave of sadness cloud his eyes. He turned back to the overlook, "Selene's deadâ€|what a

waste."

"How ARE the others, Tiger? Titan, Blackjack, Winter. Are they truly dead?" I asked him, not knowing what to believe. Was everything I had known about Valor Team a lie?!

"Yes. I watched them die." Tiger replied, grabbing his helmet with snow covered hands and placing it into his lap.

"A lot has changed since you've gone missing. Honor Team has changed. We're fighting for the UNSC now." I told him.

"All Spartans are destined to fight for the greater good. Valor Team fights for the UNSC as well." He replied, regaining his grin.

"Valor Team? I thought you said they were dead?!" I protested, confused.

"ONI Spartan III Valor Team." He replied.

Spartan III?!

"W-what?!"

"Valor Team's been reborn; rebuilt. I'm the leader of a Spec Ops squad of elite Spartan III super soldiers now. We've been working covertly for ONI for years." He explained.

I lowered my head, rustling my numb hands through my hair.

I was fucking confused!

I was overjoyed to see Tiger alive and well, but his appearance brought a lot of questions to the table, and I wasn't getting any answers; just more questions!

This was Tiger, there was no doubt about it, but something was off. He had changed drastically since I had last seen him, and that thought alone scared me.

How much had he changed?

"You know, you haven't changed at all, Van. Still reckless; still thoughtless. I've heard stories about your battles here on Spira. I wasn't surprised." He said, a wide grin on his face.

I snorted, grinning as well.

"Remember when we first gave you your nickname? Back on Ragnarok?" Tiger asked.

"I recall Zeke giving me that name while we were being chased around by a pelican dropship. I also recall you screaming your head off and criticizing my driving skills." I told him, laughing.

"You're a bloody terrible driver, Jack." He chuckled.

I grinned at him, old memories of our friendship rushing back into my mind.

This was the Tiger I remembered.

"I thought you said the past was irrelevant." I asked him.

"It is; but memories aren't." he replied, turning back to the horizon.

I turned to gaze at the snowy lands as well, wrapping the fur cloak tighter around my torso to try and warm my frigid body.

Damn I miss my armor!

"I was ordered by my superiors to come to Eden and find you, Jack. There's something ONI wants you to see." Tiger told me, his voice emotionless.

"What do they want me to see?" I asked him, confused.

He stared at me, his eyes solemn. "The truth."

The truth?

He stood, jumping down from the ledge and placing his helmet over his head. "Zeke's still alive, Jack. He's here; in Eden."

I instantly sprang up, my eyes wide with shock. "What?! Where?!"

"Come on; I'll take you there." Was all he said in reply.

"Take me where?" I asked my oldest friend, beyond curious.

He turned back to me, his gold visor shining in the snowy winds. "To where the Catalyst lies. To where Zeke sleeps."

He began to walk away, with me following close behind. "ONI SHIELD Base."

* * *

><p>Tiger pulled open the metal double-doors leading into the Command Center and strode inside the large lobby, his gray armor dripping droplets of water and creating small puddles on the granite floor.</p>

I followed close behind the Spartan, my body shaking from the bitter cold. I quickly turned and shut the metal doors, preventing the howling wind from entering the building.

I shivered as I rubbed my numb hands together, following Tiger as he walked towards the front desk; his head held high and a slight grin on his face.

The blonde receptionist behind the front desk smiled and blushed as Tiger came towards her, her framed glasses seeming to fog up from her shyness. She wore a tight blue dress and a matching hat, with the UNSC insignia etched over her chest.

"Fortes Fortuna Adiuvat." Tiger said in a calm voice, his grin unwavering as he brushed his hand against the receptionists red

cheek.

Fortune Favors The Bold.

The receptionist giggled and blushed intensely, her eyes shying away from his gaze. She quickly stood and motioned for us to follow her to the back of the lobby, where a large, metal elevator stood against the gray wall.

We followed her towards the elevator; watching as she withdrew a small, gray key from her pocket.

She reached the elevator and plunged the key into the pad beside it, flicking her wrist and causing the key to make a reassuring clicking sound from within the pad.

DING!

The elevator doors slid apart with a swoosh to reveal a small, empty room inside; with a metal rail adorning the walls and a pleasant tune filling the air.

Tiger turned back to me, a hint of anxiety in his gaze. "Wanna find out how far down the rabbit hole goes?"

He turned back towards the open elevator, as if waiting for me to enter it first.

Fuck it, I thought as I walked through the doors; the soft music seeming to fill my very brain.

Tiger chuckled and joined me inside the elevator, causing the floor to dip slightly and groan under the weight of his armor.

He gave a final wave to the receptionist as the doors began to shut, sealing us inside the brightly lit room.

"This is a huge privilege, Van. Only ONI operatives and select individuals are allowed to enter the SHILED Base; its existence is completely classified." Tiger told me as he pressed a glowing red button on the wall adjacent to the doors.

I gave him a nod.

"So let me guess: this elevator is gonna take us down to the center of the earth or something, right?" I asked my old friend, grinning.

Tiger laughed, placing his hand on my shoulder. "Not exactly."

I yelped in surprise as the elevator lurched backwards, a loud humming sound filling the room as we began to pick up speed. I struggled to stay afoot as the floor began to shake and vibrate below my feet.

Tiger chuckled as he watched me struggle, standing completely still due to the weight of his armor keeping him grounded.

The elevator continued to fly backwards at alarming speeds, and I feared that we would smash into an unforeseen wall and splatter into

a thousand pieces. It was beyond unsettling feeling yourself move so fast without knowing where you were heading.

"You look like you're about to vomit!" Tiger taunted as he gazed down on me; watching as I sat on the floor and gripped the railing for dear life.

"If I do then I'll make sure to do it on that shiny, gray armor!" I shot back, grinning.

"AGH FUCK!" I shouted as the elevator made a sudden stop, launching me backwards and slamming my head against the wall.

Tiger laughed as I rose to my feet, aching and sore as I shook the dizziness from my mind.

"Shut up." I told him as the elevator began to spin around, causing my stomach to churn in protest.

DING!

"We're here." He said, watching as the doors slid apart to reveal a massive room beyond.

The room was easily half a kilometer in width and length, with the metal ceiling reaching a hundred feet high. Two sets of metal stairs were crafted into the floor along the left and right wall and rose towards the ceiling, reaching up fifty feet before connecting with a second level above the first.

The first level was breathtakingly beautiful: rows of small trees were planted along metal paths and rails; their spiny limbs covered in an array of orange, red, and brown leaves. Large, cylindrical pillars of light were placed along the edges of the room, reaching the ceiling and illuminating the room in bright light. ONI agents and scientists occupied the room, talking with each other and studying their research.

"Come on." Tiger commanded as he left the elevator, heading through the courtyard of trees and towards the stairwell leading up to the second level.

I followed him in silence, gazing around at the ONI personnel as they eyed us and whispered to each other.

"Uh, so where are we exactly?" I asked Tiger as we began to make our way up the large stairwell; bright, fiery trees decorating the sides of the stairs and cluttering the metal steps with orange leaves.

"This is ONI SHIELD Base; a top-secret research facility that was built in the center of the Talos Mountain." Tiger answered, glancing back at me.

Wait, we're inside a mountain?!

We reached the top of the stairwell, spotting a long, transparent walkway that led to a large wall adorned with several metal doors. A granite statue of a circle with a black and white triangle inside it was erected in the center of the walkway: the ONI insignia.

The ONI Agent I had given Zeke to during The Battle of the Crevice was standing in front of the statue, a wide grin on his pale face as he waved us towards him.

He was probably in his early forties, with fierce blue eyes and short, fiery red hair. He wore the same coal black uniform, with a red tie sticking out of his collar and resting against his chest.

"Ah, Valor Leader; you've returned with our special guest!" The Agent exclaimed in joy as we reached him.

The Agent turned to me, his hand outstretched. "Spartan IV Vanguard-032! It's an honor to meet your acquaintance again! I am Jason Toran, Lead Director of ONI SHIELD Division."

I hesitated before shaking his hand, eyeing him suspiciously.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions, and I'd be more than happy to answer them on our walk through the facility. Come, come!" Toran said as he turned and began to walk down the walkway, waving for us to follow.

I caught up with him quickly, eager to have my questions answered. "Where's Zeke? What did you guys do to him?"

"I knew that would be your first question; it's probably been plaguing your mind since the day we took him away." Toran smiled as he glanced back at me. "Your comrade is alive, and he is here; in SHIELD Base."

"Then take me to him!" I replied, my eagerness and hopes rising.

Toran looked back at me again, a hint of worry in his face. "That would be problematic."

"What? Why?!"

"Subject 14 was injured quite severely when we brought him back here, and he had lost so much blood that we feared he would bleed out or enter cardiac arrest before we could even begin to treat his wounds. We were forced to seal him inside a Cryostasis Module and temporarily place him into an induced coma; effectively putting his mind to sleep and disabling all other body functions." Toran explained as we neared the end of the walkway.

Subject 14? Why was he calling Zeke Subject 14?

"With his body completely disabled we were able to begin repairing his organs and veins, and hopefully reconstruct his damaged lung and missing arm using Mechanic Prostheses. Our medical personnel are working as fast as they can, but they predict that it will take at least a year before Subject 14 can even regain consciousness, let alone move again."

A painful jolt of dread clenched my heart.

A year?

I would be long dead before I could even see Zeke again.

Tiger and I followed Toran through the small clearing beyond the walkway and towards an ajar door which led into a long, narrow hallway. Dozens of metal doors cluttered the walls, and strips of white light brightened the hall.

"Next question: what exactly is this place? Why is it here?" I asked the ONI Agent.

"Ah, an excellent question!" Toran exclaimed as he entered the hallway, moving to the side to let a group of scientists through. "ONI SHIELD Base was constructed into the mountain over a hundred years ago, to serve as a Headquarters for ONI research and sciences on the planet. For years the base has been used to study the planet and its secrets, as well as a facility to create prototype weaponry and machines for ONI's personal uses. Biological, Biochemical, Nanomachinery, Ballistics, Atomics, Genetics; it's all researched here."

I let that sink in.

"This way." Toran said as we reached the end of the hallway. He swiftly withdrew a keyring filled with iron keys and unlocked the metal door ahead of us, gripping the doorknob and swinging it open.

The door revealed a small, dim room with a rectangular platform forming the floor; metal rails jutting from the edges and forming a perimeter around the floor. The walls continued upwards and disappeared from sight, making the room resemble a large elevator shaft.

Toran stepped onto the platform and motioned for us to do the same.

We stepped onto the platform after the ONI Agent, who pressed a button on the small computer that was standing in the center of the platform.

With a shudder the entire platform began to descend slowly, the gears underneath it humming and roaring to life as they turned.

"Whoa." I said in surprise, watching as the door we had just entered through rose above our heads. "I was not expecting that."

"We're almost to our destination, Spartan. Do you have any more questions?" Toran asked me.

"Yeah." I replied. "Tiger mentioned that Valor Team had been recreated. He said that it was now a team of Spartan III's."

"Ah, yes! The Spartans III's were never as well received or impressive as their predecessors, but some of them still managed to catch ONI's eye. Back in 2557, Spartan III's had become a rarity in the UNSC, due to most of them being killed during or after the war. ONI was able to save a few dozen of them from death at the hands of the Covenant or their careless UNSC leaders, and offered them a chance to renounce their allegiance to the UNSC and serve as Spec Ops

soldiers under the control of ONI. Some of them refused, including Jun-A266, but most couldn't resist the opportunity." Toran explained.

The platform shrieked loudly as it finally came to a stop; a large, steel door displayed against the wall ahead of us.

I clamped my hands over my ears as the steel doors began to open, creating an ear-splitting screeching sound and sending chills up my spine. The noise ceased as the doors came to a halt, revealing a large chasm beyond.

An enormous pyramid-shaped artifact rested in the center of the chasm, its surface constructed of a polished, gray, metal similar to the artifact I had seen back in the Crevice. Blue symbols adorned the massive spire, and the metal seemed to pulse with a soft, blue aura. Blue cracks and scars covered the artifact as well; pulsing in unison and glowing a dim blue.

Four metal ovals surrounded the artifact from top to bottom, with each being connected to a different floor level of the chasm. Dozens of computers were placed along the levels, and ONI scientists were busy studying the artifact.

The main floor level appeared to have been built around the massive artifact; cluttered with computers, machinery, and scientists.

The entire room was beyond breathtaking and awe-inspiring, and the large artifact was unmeasured in its elegance and beauty; but surprisingly, that wasn't the first thing that caught my eye.

Two Spartans stood in front of the large doorway, their backs leaning against the doorframes as if they had been waiting for our arrival.

The Spartan on the left was seven feet tall and slender, with a set of black and white MJOLNIR Mark VI armor with a blood red visor. A Prototype Railgun was strapped onto his back, and a .50 caliber magnum rested in its holster on his chestplate.

The Spartan on the right was clearly female; with an excellently curved body and a polished set of silver and blue Mark VI armor. Her helmet was unique: a silver E.V.A model with a bright pink visor. An MA5B rifle was strapped to her back, with a detachable grenade launcher mounted below the frame.

I stared at the Spartans in awe, my mind unable to realize what I was looking at.

These were Spartans! SPARTANS!

"Is this the fabled Vanguard?" Spoke the female Spartan as she stood and walked towards us, moving to remove her helmet. She unlatched the helm and lifted it over her head, causing me to gasp in complete shock.

I had seen her face before.

Curly brown hair. Beautiful, Hazel eyes. Soft skin. A strikingly pretty face. A smile that created a swarm of angry butterflies inside

of my stomach.

I had seen her face beforeâ€¦but something was offâ€¦a slight difference in eye color? A narrower jaw line? A skinnier nose?

This wasn't Princess; though she looked almost exactly like her.

A cousin, maybe? A sister?

"Yeah, it is. Van, this is Spartan III Legacy-V343. Valor Two." Said Tiger quickly as he introduced her.

A Spartan III.

"So this truly is Vanguard: the Spartan IV who trained alongside Tiger and the other candidates. The one who survived all odds and grew up to become a Spartan super soldier. The one who's continuously shown finesse and bravery in combat against any foe, including the Covenant Warlord." Legacy said as she examined me, a grin on her beautiful face. "Interesting."

I eyed her suspiciously. She knew about my origins. She knew about my training. She knew about my feats.

What else had Tiger told her?

Did she know about Princess?

Did she know that one of her family members was kidnapped, forced to undergo torture and training, and killed during the process of becoming a super soldier?

"And that one over there is Anon-V174. Valor Three." Tiger said as he pointed towards the Spartan with the Railgun.

Anon didn't move to greet me; instead crossing his arms across his chest and turning to stare at the giant artifact.

"Eh, he doesn't talk much." Tiger confessed, scratching his head.

"I've noticed." I replied, stepping off of the platform and towards the artifact. "Is that it? Is that what Odin is trying to find?"

"The Catalyst." Toran said as he walked to my side, a proud grin on his face. "That's what we call it."

"What is it?" I asked him, curios.

This is what we were fighting for.

"It took us over twenty years to answer that question. It is a portal, Spartan; an ancient, Forerunner portal." Toran answered as he gazed with pride at the construct.

"Where does it lead?" I asked him.

He looked at me, "where do you think?"

I thought about it, realizing that the answer had been staring us in the face the entire time.

"Gamma Halo."

"Exactly. It leads into Gamma Halo's control room, to be precise. Sadly we don't know how to activate the portal, so there's no way of confirming that fact." Toran replied.

I gazed at my magnificent artifact; lost in its beauty.

Selene had died for this.

Ghost had died for this.

"We should destroy it; stop Odin from EVER using this thing." I told Toran in confidence.

"That was my idea as well." Tiger added.

"No! Absolutely not!" Exclaimed Toran in complete disapproval. "ONI is not at liberty to destroy an object of suchâ€¦immense knowledge and wonder! Do you know what we can learn from an artifact like this?! Do you know-"

"So ONI is willing to risk the lives of every human being in this galaxy?" I protested.

Toran hesitated, as if lost in thought. He gazed at the artifact again before answering, his face clouded in a grim uncertainty.
"Sacrifices must be made in the pursuit of knowledge."

* * *

><p>"Prototype Mark III VORTEK Armor." Tiger announced as he stood in front of the large table, where a set of snow white armor lay in pieces. The armor pieces reflected the bright light of the research lab and seemed to glow a pure white.</p>

The armor was fascinating in its design. The chestplate was shaped like a crude "X," with a triangular crest in the center. The shoulder plates were long and flat, forming two dull spikes that jutted above the shoulders. There were six small armor pieces that covered each arm, and a seventh formed the rectangular guard over the wearer's hand. Three pieces covered each leg, which an entire piece being devoted to covering the kneecap and maximizing flexibility.

The helmet was unique as well. Its shape was similar to an ODST helm, and it had a "V" shaped visor that seemed to be formed of polished gold. A black line ran from the top of the helm across the back, spreading into the interior and filling it was darkness.

"This is the only set of VORTEK armor in existence, so you should feel extremely special." Tiger told me as he lifted an armored gauntlet off of the table, moving to hand it to me.

"I do. So what makes this armor so unique?" I asked him as I held the gauntlet in my hand, taking note of its surprising lightness.

"Well, for starters, it's formed of over a dozen pieces of Titanium-A

plating; meaning it's relatively light and equally flexible. Of course the drawback to that is it's not as durable as MJOLNIR armor. The armor pieces are worn over top of a XNT Nanocomposite Kevlar bodysuit, which attaches directly to your skin for maximum flexibility." Tiger explained as he stared at the armor fragments.

"Sounds interesting. What else?" I asked, eager to hear what else the armor had to offer.

"To help compensate for its lacking durability, the armor was equipped with a Prototype Mass-Fusion Shield System." Tiger answered with a grin.

"Mass-Fusion Shield System?" I repeated aloud.

"It's a shield system that uses an internal plasmid power core to create a shield that generates maximum strength and efficiency. It's an adaption of the shield systems used by Elite Majors, so you can expect to take a lot of firepower before they flare up."

"Damn, that's gonna come in handy." I commented.

"That's not all. The armor also has XNT integrated into it."

"XNT?" I asked, raising my head to look at Tiger.

"Xerxes Nanomechanic Technology. Trillions of microscopic Nanomachines are injected from the armor and into your bloodstream and muscle tissue, which will vastly increases endurance, agility, and strength as long as you are wearing the full set of armor and your shields aren't being activated." Tiger explained.

"Similar to the MVES system."

"Not exactly. The MVES system was highly underdeveloped and flawed; a consequence from it being created by inexperienced rebels. The XNT system is far superior; boasting stability, efficiency, and best of all: no effects to life energy." Tiger replied.

If only I had known that before!

"It took the scientists and engineers here two years to create and perfect this set of armor, and it's their most prized jewel; so try not to scratch it up too bad, okay?" Tiger asked, jokingly.

"I'll try not to." I told him as I stuck my left hand into the armored gauntlet and locked it in place, getting up to grab the arm fragments. I placed the armor pieces onto my arm as instructed by Tiger, hearing them seal shut around my arm and snap onto the Nanocomposite suit underneath. When I was finished I held out my left arm, grinning as I moved my armored limb around. Tiger was right, it was extremely lightweight; a welcome change from the heavy MJOLNIR suit.

"Well, what do you think?" Tiger asked as he watched me move my fingers.

I lifted my head and stared at him, a wide grin on my face. "I'm not cold."

* * *

><p>Lord Hood and his convoy had arrived later that afternoon.</p>

Gizmo, Hercules and I had watched from atop the north wall as the massive Destroyer descended towards Eden from above the Silent Plains; its massive hull blocking out the sun and casting the entire city in dim light. In the streets below us, marines and soldiers were shouting and cheering as they watched the ship come, ecstatic to see their beloved leader set foot in the city.

I shook my head and turned away, hearing my armored boots clank against the wet wall as I began to head towards our room.

Hood had ordered every UNSC soldier present in Eden to dress in ceremonial uniforms and rally in front of the Command Center, where he would be giving his long awaited "Creed of War" in an hour.

It was fucking ridiculous. It was fucking insane. It was fucking dishonorable.

I haven't had your goddamn blessing in the past, Hood, and I've managed to survive; so why the fuck would I need it now!?

* * *

><p>It's cold.</p>

Didn't I just get a new set of shiny armor? With an internal heating system? Why the fuck am I not wearing it?!

Damnit it's cold!

I stood shivering beside Deseron and Armstrong amidst the frigid cold, with nothing to keep me warm except for the black tuxedo with the UNSC insignia emblazoned on the chest. A red tie was hidden beneath my coat, and Deseron had managed to spray me with cologne despite my extreme protest.

Deseron and Armstrong were dressed in black tuxes as well, and they didn't seem to notice my shivering as they continued to stare forward. Their breaths came out as vaporous clouds of air, and small specks of snow continued to rain onto their suits.

We were standing on a large wooden platform built at the top of the staircase leading up towards the Command Center, with thousands upon thousands of UNSC marines standing at the bottom of the stairs and filling the streets beyond. They all stood proud and at attention as Lord Hood stood in front of a microphone stand, dressed in his famous white tux and matching hat.

Admiral Briggs was standing to our far left, alongside Admiral Hawke and another Admiral that I did not know. I could see the intensity of her burning eyes through the rain of snow: she was beyond pissed.

Several other Colonels, Sergeants, Corporals, and Lieutenants were standing around the platform, representing their numerous battalions

and platoons.

The sun was setting on the horizon, blanketing the entire city in a fire of red light and ushering in a new era of bitter wind and cold.

It would be night soon, which meant it would only get colder.

Lord Hood raised his hand towards the crowd of soldiers, hushing them instantly and gaining their undivided attention.

Shitâ€|here we go.

"My friends!" he began, his voice booming and echoing through the city streets. "My allies. My comrades. Thank you for welcoming me into your glorious city. I must admit; I fell in love with your magnificent city the moment I laid eyes upon it. It truly is beautiful, and you must be proud to call it yours."

The crowd was silent.

"But I didn't come to marvel at your city. I came for a different reason; a darker reason. A storm is coming, my fellow soldiers, and it hopes to lay waste to this entire city."

Whispers and murmurs through the crowd. Soldiers look around with unease on their faces.

"The enemy number in the tens of thousands. Their ships occupy our airspace and their tanks roll across our plains. They have raised spirits and lifted weapons, and it seems that even a golden god is on their side. Tacticians and advisors would state that we stand no chance; but I do not believe that fact."

Hood stopped, taking the time to gaze out into the hundreds of faces staring back at him.

"I have faith in you; it's true. I trust that you will prevail over all odds, because you have in the past. Harvest. Arcadia. Harmony. Reach."

He paused again, his gaze lifted towards the stars above.

"Earth." He finally spoke the word. "Through all the losses, all the suffering, all the sacrifice, all the blood, all the fear, all the anxiety, all the despair; through it all, YOU HAVE PREVAILED!"

The entire city was ablaze with the roar of cheers and war chants: hundreds of soldier throwing their fists into the air and shouting to the high heavens.

I could feel the vibrations through my boots.

The first of many roars.

"When I look in front of me I see an army of heroes; a family of soldiers devoted to the greater good and the safety of humanity. I see the young, the old, the brave, the bold. I see you all! And I can also see what lies within; I can feel the rising flames that eat at your very souls. You are ready! You are ready to fight for all that

you love! You are ready to fight for EDEN!"

Another barrage of roars and cheers, this one far greater than the last.

He had won the crowd.

"We will not fail. We will not show mercy. We will not give them a single inch of our city. This is our land; our home! It will REMAIN ours! The blood of our enemies will be spilled in gallons across the plains, forming massive rivers of defiance that will overwhelm and drown the living! We will fight, and we will succeed! That is our Creed! That is our Creed of War!" Hood finished, raising his fists into the air for added effect.

He stepped down from the microphone as another roar erupted through the city; shaking the buildings and causing the ground to hum.

"HOOD!"

"HOOD!"

"HOOD!"

Lord Hood walked briskly towards Admiral Briggs, taking the time to smile and wave at his beloved soldiers.

"HOOD!"

"HOOD!"

"HOOD!"

The supreme commander stood in front of Briggs and leaned in, placing his mouth next to her ear. I was yards away, but I could still make out the words that formed from his aged lips.

"Start the celebration."

* * *

><p>WELCOME TO EDEN LORD HOOD!

The large banners were hung across the streets and on top of buildings, followed by similar signs being plastered on the walls. Confetti and streamers were scattered across the entire city; twisting and swirling around in the cold breeze.

Booze of all different varieties was spilled on every inch of the streets and sidewalks, and empty bottles were casually thrown in all directions.

Soft, classical music filled the streets and echoed through the air, accompanied by the shouts, chants, and cheers of the hundreds of soldiers celebrating below.

Eden was alive with the joy of celebration.

The commanding officers and select VIPs were attending Lord Hood's personal ball: an extravagant dance located in the lobby of the Command Center.

Dim lights swept across the granite floor and cast a soft light against the dancing officers, and classical music selected by Lord Hood himself was being played through a dozen speakers scattered across the room.

High ranking officers were enjoying the celebration as they danced with beautiful receptionists and secretaries; their glassed eyes staring down their shirts and grins upon their faces. I spotted Deseron in a black tuxedo as he slow-danced with a striking blond secretary, his eyes trapped within her warm gaze. She was whispering sweet nothings into his ear; her left hand stroking the hidden weapon between his legs.

I watched the humans dance from the back of the room, a glass of vodka in one hand and my red tie in the other. I watched in silence as they enjoyed their festivities; completely ignoring the storm that was rushing towards them.

Tiger was right; we did live in different worlds.

Admiral Briggs moved into view and walked towards me, causing my jaw to drop and my eyes to widen as I gazed upon her.

She wore a billowing blue dress that clung tightly to her curves: its ripples and color seeming to form an ocean of pure blue water that ran down her body. Her hair was neatly brushed, falling down onto her shoulders and glowing with a glow of beauty. Blue eye liner was placed under her striking eyes, and a shade of intense, red lipstick was emblazoned on her luscious lips.

She smiled as she gazed at me, her eyes alone causing my blood to freeze. "Yeah; I seem to have that effect on people."

"Whoaâ€|" I managed to say, regaining my composure slightly. "You lookâ€|amazing."

"Thanks." She smiled, sending another wave of butterflies into my stomach.

"This is fucking ridiculous. We shouldn't be celebrating anything right now; we should be planning our battle strategy and preparing for war!" she huffed in anger.

My eyes widened again as I realized her sudden change in behavior.

"It seems everyone else is ensnared in Hood's little trap. He's blinding them from the inevitable." I told her, watching the officers laugh and dance.

"Exactly." Briggs agreed, turning to scan the room. "I'm sorry, Vanguard, but I have to go. I'm due for my dance with Hawke."

A frown appeared on her face as she moved forward, embracing me and resting her head against my shoulder. I struggled to think and move as I stared in shock and awe at the locks of blonde hair that fell

onto her back; the lovely scent of spring roses rising into my nose.

"Stay vigilant, Van." She said as she stepped away, giving me a final smile before turning and disappearing within the crowd of dancers.

I watched her go; lost in a trance of amazement and surprise.

"_How lucky can one guy be? I kissed her, and, she kissed me. Like the fella once said-_"

The song seemed to flood my mind and lift my soul with its melodious tune: it was a popular classic from the 20th Century; sung by a spectacular singer known as Dean Martin.

"_Ain't that a kick in the head?"

I decided to make my way through the crowd and find Tiger; hopefully being able to find him sober and not humping a drunken receptionist.

I struggled to make my way through the mass of flailing arms and bodies as people danced around me, laughing and smiling and having a good old time.

"_The room was completely black. I hugged her, and, she hugged back."_

I was able to break free of the mass of dancers and stumbled into a clearing in the center of the room, trying to regain my balance as I lifted my head to stare at the lone woman gazing down at me.

Legacy-343 was wearing a silk dress made of red, with a matching tiara above her curly brown hair and red eyeliner against her soft skin. She was nearly as beautiful as Briggs; her gaze sending waves of warmth into my heart.

"Vanguard?" she asked as I rose to my feet.

"_Like the sailor said "Quote: ""_

"Uh, hi." I managed to say as the people surrounding us began to slow-dance again; oblivious to the two Spartans nearby.

"You came just in time; I was getting a little lonely." She smiled, moving towards me. "Let's dance."

"_Ain't that a hole in the boat?"

Before I could respond she grabbed my hands and placed one against her hip, intertwining her fingers into my other hand and wrapping her free arm around my back. She moved closer to me and began to rock back and forth, her face literally inches away from mine.

They taught me a lot of things back in Ragnarok: How to hotwire a warthog. How to disable a Pelican without using any kind of firearm. How to kill a man with both arms tied behind my back. How to resist extreme torture. How to infiltrate an enemy facility, retrieve a classified object, and kill everyone inside before they could get a

chance to sound the alarm.

Do you know what they didn't teach me back in Ragnarok?

How to fucking slow-dance!

Sweat began to form on my forehead as I struggled not to step on Legacy's feet, and I tried my absolute hardest to keep with the rhythm and not look like a total jackass.

It wasn't working.

Legacy smiled and chuckled as she gazed into my eyes, no doubt realizing fairly quickly that I was a terrible dancer.

I could slaughter an entire company of Covenant soldiers with two energy swords with relative ease; but attempting to dance with a beautiful woman? Fucking impossible!

"Try to relax. It's a dance, not a firefight. Don't try so hard." Legacy told me as she spun around, returning to my embrace and pressing her body against mine again.

"I was trained for war, not dance." I told her, forming a slight grin.

"I can see that." She laughed, her gaze unwavering.

She finally broke her gaze and glanced around the room, her smile growing wider. "Look at them all. They act as if they didn't have a care in the world."

"Ignorance is bliss." I replied, watching her eyes. She was so beautiful!

Her eyes shot back towards mine, "ignorance is a drug for the simple-minded. There's a storm coming, Jack, and no one here is prepared for it."

"How do you know my name?" I asked her, curious.

She laughed again, breaking off into another spin before returning to me. "Tiger talks about you a lot. You truly were his closest friend, weren't you?"

Was I still?

"What else did Tiger tell you?" I asked her, wondering if she knew anything about Princess.

"Sadly nothing of interest to me. You knew her, didn't you?" Legacy asked, her voice becoming softer.

"Who?" I asked.

She laughed again. "You know who, Jack."

Princess.

"She was your sister." I said aloud, confirming their

connection.

Legacy paused, her eyes seeming to plunge into mine in hopes of revealing the memories of Princess. "I want to know about her; but Tiger won't tell me anything. I'm beginning to think that he never will."

"And you're hoping that I would help you fill in the gaps?" I asked her, already knowing the answer.

"I want to know everything you know about her; every single detail." Legacy said, her voice stern.

I grinned again.

"You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. I want to know everything you know as well. I want you to help me fill in the gaps in his life." I told her, proposing a deal.

She stared at me for a few seconds, calculating exactly what I was asking in her brain.

"Tiger." She finally spoke, her eyes gazing into mine.

"Every single detail." I told her.

She smiled and laughed, stroking my back with her soft hand. "You're a lot smarter than you look, Spartan."

"So we have a deal?" I asked her.

Legacy smiled and leaned forward, pressing her lips against mine as she kissed me. I could feel the intensity of her lips as they held onto mine: feel the warmth of her soul through the passion that was formed between us. I wanted to freeze time and kiss her for an eternity.

I was ready to doom the entire galaxy in order to hold on to that single kiss.

To my despair our lips detached and she backed away, a smile still stretching across her lovely face. "We'll talk again soon, Jack."

She turned and walked away; her elegant red dress disappearing in the crowd.

I sighed as I watched her leave, the lingering passion of our kiss still intoxicating my mind.

Ain't that a kick in the head?

* * *

><p>I awoke to the loud blare of a siren as it wailed through the air, filling my mind with vibrations. I bolted upright and leapt out of the small cot, my body on full alert.</p>

Hercules stood in full armor in the doorway, a MA5B held in his right hand.

"Van, it's time." Was all he said.

He didn't have to say anything else.

I knew exactly what he meant.

I quickly turned to the crate beside my cot and swung it open, revealing the VORTEK armor that lay in pieces within its frame.

I grabbed the helmet and held it in my hands, staring into the visor and letting out a long exhale.

It was time for war.

* * *

><p>"How many are there?" I asked Brigadier General Deseron as I walked to his side, my helmet tucked under my right arm and a thick fur cloak wrapped tightly over my white armor.</p>

"I lost count." He replied as he stared down towards the Silent Plains.

The sun was beginning to rise above the horizon and bring with it a new, dreaded day; its vibrant rays of light illuminating the fortress-city of Eden and the massive army marching towards it.

I gazed down towards the advancing army from our position atop the north wall, my heartbeat quickening as I watched the sea of purple as it moved forward through the snowy winds and the white plains.

A massive ocean of purple was slowly advancing towards us from across the plains; its bulk formed of thousands and thousands of Covenant soldiers. They marched forward in eerie silence, with large, colossal ships following from above.

The marines and soldiers standing along the city walls and in the streets below looked ahead with blank faces and widened eyes; their spirits plummeting rapidly as they witnessed the massive horde that had finally arrived.

I turned towards Deseron, watching silently as he shook his head in disbelief.

"God save us all."

27. III: One Way Out

"_Everyone knows how far down the rabbit hole goes, but no one knows how far you fall before losing your fucking sanity._"

Admiral Briggs, Circa 2552

* * *

><p>Chapter Three: One Way Out

JOHN

**Date: Unknown (ANOMALY) / Location: Forerunner Control Room,
Requiem (CONFIRMED)**

I raised my assault rifle towards the metal construct buzzing around my head and squeezed the trigger, feeling my anger escape from the barrel alongside the heated bullets.

"Reclaimer! Reclaimer!" 119 Stygian Solace exclaimed as he swiftly evaded the projectiles, swooping downwards and hovering directly in front of my face. His glowing eye peered into my visor, sending chills down my spine. "I must request that you stay calm, Reclaimer!"

"You killed Fisher!" I shot back at the construct, a slight growl in my voice.

"Chiefâ€|" Cortana whispered into my head, her voice quick and full of sorrow.

"Is that what that ignorant organism was called? Fascinatingâ€|" Solace chirped as he bobbed up and down, as if jumping with glee.

I jabbed my armored hand forward to grab the floating construct, which quickly darted backwards out of reach.

Stygian Solace's eye flashed a bright red as he shot a searing beam into my chest, sending my body flying backwards and into a terminal with incredible force and heat. I sat dazed as I lifted my head to stare at the flying construct, his eyes peering back at me with a vicious red hue.

"I was doing you a favor, Reclaimer. That insolent organism would have only hindered your progress through the Presidium."

"What?! If you think I'm still going to help you kill your Gravemind then think again!" I shot back at the construct, rising to my feet.

"Oh I disagree, Reclaimer." Solace hissed grimly as he slowly soared towards me, his eye glowing hotter. "There's only one way out of here, and I'm the only one that can help you find it. I am in control here, Reclaimer. This place is my sanctuary; my home. You're in my domain now, and that means that you either play by my rules or sit and rot here for eternity."

A chill slid down my spine as I glared at the construct, not knowing what to do.

"You're a bastard." Cortana hissed back at Solace, her voice menacing.

"I would keep your mouth shut, you rampant useless waste of data. You really can't afford to sit here and argue with me, Reclaimer; time is running out."

"What do you mean?" I asked 119 Stygian Solace.

"The _Mortuum _Bacterium that has been filling the air in this chamber has also been slipping through your inferior filtration

systems and into your lungs and blood stream: a disgraceful side effect of weak and wasteful human technologies." Solace explained, his eye pulsing with light.

"What are you saying?" I asked it, confused.

"In less than 20 hours the trillions of _Vosh Mortuus _Parasitic Bacterium will infect your organs and blood and transform you into the walking abomination that you had just killed moments ago." Solace concluded, his clicking laugh sending more chills through my veins.

A knot of dread formed in my stomach, and I could feel my heart quicken its beating.

"So that's your Ace-In-The-Hole!" Cortana said grimly.

"The only way to effectively stop the infection is to dispose of the source, which in turn will eradicate all of the bacterium connected to it." Solace chirped.

"The Mesa-Gravemind." I growled through deep breaths.

Stygian Solace let out his unusual laughing noise and bobbed through the air again in glee.

This was all a game to him.

I had played his game, and I had been doomed to lose from the beginning.

"Like I said, Reclaimer, this is my world. You play by my rules, or you die." Solace announced, his voice synthetic and emotionless.

I stared back at the construct, a sense of extreme hopelessness overwhelming my mind.

I was trapped.

I wasn't in control of my own life.

I was now a puppet; a piece in this malevolent machine's twisted game.

"Now then! Let's proceed with the task at hand!" Solace exclaimed as he whizzed around the control room, his attitude completely changed. "I should be able to use this control room's Mass Teleportation Network to teleport you straight to the Gateway, but what I'm worried about is interference!"

"We need to stay calm, John. I know it's going to be hard for you to put your anger aside for now and focus on escaping, but if we don't do what is necessary in order to leave this place, then Fisher's death will have been meaningless." Cortana spoke into my mind, her voice low.

I remained silent, battling with opposing thoughts in my head.

"When this is over," I declared, staring up at the floating construct. "I'm going to smash that thing into a thousand pieces."

I swear it.

"Reclaimer!" Solace shouted as he flew back to me, his eye now pulsing a soft blue. "I have excellent news! I can transport you to the Gateway from here!"

"Great." I told the construct sarcastically, shouldering my MA5B. "Then let's get this over with already."

Solace grew silent, its frame hovering around me as if he was examining me.

"What?" I asked rhetorically, watching as the construct spun around my torso.

"You seem to be wearing a vastly ineffective suit of primitive armor, Reclaimer! That set of armor simply won't do! The Mortuus will tear you to pieces in seconds if you go into the presidium in that set of rust and bolts!" Solace exclaimed as he bobbed around.

"I think he just called the MJOLNIR Mark VI a piece of shitâ€|" Cortana's voice rang in my head.

"Not to worry, Reclaimer, I should be able to use the Mass Teleportation Network to transport a set of armor from Requiem's armory! That would prove far more effective than your current set." Solace chimed.

"No." I told him, standing my ground. "I'm keeping my own armor. I'll be fine."

There was no way in hell I was giving up my MJOLNIR armor.

Solace made a high humming sound and bobbed around my head, its eye turning a light hazel. "Are you certain, Reclaimer? My analysis indicates that you would actually be better off facing the Vosh Mortuus naked rather than in that inadequate piece of_"

I grabbed the construct and pulled it towards my visor, its hazel light filling my vision. "I'm certain."

"Well then!" Stygian Solace exclaimed as he flew out of reach, shaking like a wet dog.

I shook my head and glanced down at my hands, noticing that I was still holding the MA5B tightly. I lifted it and let the ammo magazine slid out and into my open palm, cursing inwardly as I stared into its emptiness.

"I can't kill your Mesa-Gravemind with my bare hands. I need ammunition." I told Solace as I retrieved the FAMAS from my back and let its ammo mag fall to the cold floor, its hollow interior clattering loudly.

"Ah ha!" Solace chirped loudly as he raced towards me and examined the rifles, his eye glowing a bright yellow. "I was beginning to wonder when you were going to contemplate discarding your inferior human projectile weaponry for something better!"

I could hear Cortana growl and huff in anger. "Smartass little light bulb son of a bit!"

"Cortana." I shot at her, forcing her to keep her comments to herself.

"Just give me something I can fight with." I told Solace, watching as the golden construct bobbed around.

"Of course! Of course!" Solace chimed as he began to radiate yellow light, illuminating the entire room with a sun of brilliance. "It should be relatively easy to transport one of my creator's weapons from Requiem's Armory using the Mass Teleportation Network!"

My gauntlets began to heat as I felt the air around me tighten and burn. I panicked, backing away suddenly as I shut my eyes from the intense light emanating from Stygian Solace, my arms outstretched.

In an instant the flash of light faded, revealing a humming Solace floating ahead of me and a long, ancient weapon in my hands.

"Whoa." I murmured as I stared down at the gray artifact in my hands, noting its incredibly light weight and unique design. The ancient weapon was shaped like a long, horizontal "V" shape, with the razor tip glowing a deep blue as runic scars raced across the gray frame. There was a circular grip constructed into the back of the weapon, with a crescent hair-trigger placed within it. The weapon was also fairly big, forcing me to slide half of my forearm into the back before I could wrap my fingers around the trigger.

"Success!" Stygian Solace chimed joyously.

"What is this?" I asked Solace, lifting my head to stare into his pulsing blue eye.

"It's a weapon, Reclaimer! The Vegna-Zartarius Vagabond, to be precise! My creator's had spent many eons perfecting and manufacturing the Vagabond here on Requiem, and data records say that there are still 9,999,999,999 left in stock in the Armory." Solace replied.

"How exactly do I use it?" I asked the construct.

"Excellent question, Reclaimer! The Vagabond was designed to serve as both a ranged weapon capable of eradicating threats at over 700 meters away, as well as functioning as a melee weapon for use in close-quarters combat. The Vagabond uses a Mass Propulsions Decompression Amplifier to collect a cluster of molecules from a metal slab placed within its frame, and then infuse that molecule cluster with condensed gases and electric currents to shoot out a high powered beam from the barrel once the trigger is squeezed. This method of projectile technology allows the weapon to feed off of an infinitely limitless pool of ammunition, while still retaining a high amount of power and force with each beam fired. Similar technology is used in the Sentinel constructs that my creator's manufactured as well." Solace explained, some of the words becoming slurred together as he spoke quickly.

I lowered my head to look back at the rifle in my hand, moving my

fingers around inside the trigger-holster experimentally. I pressed my thumb against a small switch on the top of the holster and felt a rush of energy pass through the frame of the weapon, condensing and manifesting on the tip and forming a triangular white beam that glowed with searing power.

"Whoa!" I murmured again as I moved my arm, allowing the searing energy blade to cut through the air itself and hiss with might.

"I think you will find the Vagabond as a very reliable alternative to your eh!human weapons, Reclaimer." Solace chirped as he watched me slash the blade through the air.

I nodded in agreement and continued to stare at the heavenly blade, feeling its vast strength and energy surge through my arm. I pressed the switch again and caused the blade to dissipate and fade into nothingness.

I turned my head and peered at the corpse of Fisher that continued to rot in a pool of flesh and blood, a cold chill sliding down my spine.

"So, Reclaimer, are you ready to head into the Presidium now? I'm afraid we've been here for quite some time and I must remind you that time is indeed a factor!" Stygian Solace chirped as he hovered in front of me, his eye resonating with a gentle green.

I sighed and turned to stare into the green energy inside the construct's eye, calming myself and collecting my thoughts.

"Let's just get this over with." I answered, turning back to the construct.

"Excellent! Excellent!" Solace exclaimed excitedly. "Now listen carefully, Reclaimer, I will only tell you this once: once you reach the Gateway, I will be unable to help and guide you through the presidium. You will be on your own, Reclaimer, and I trust that you will be able to overcome the odds and emerge successful!"

"Chief!" Cortana said softly, her voice seeming to flow into my very soul. "Are you sure about this? What if this is a trap? What if Solace is just using us as a pawn in some bigger game at play here? What if we never make it back home; to Sol, to Earth?"

I took a few moments to answer. We needed to swallow our doubts and fears if we were to make it out of here alive, and make it back to our home world. Getting back to Earth was my primary goal, and if that meant I had to help a psychotic robot annihilate an entire species of walking corpses, then that's what I'd do. "We'll make it back."

A sudden fire of golden energy engulfed my armor and sent waves of searing heat through my skin. A sense of extreme weightlessness washed over me as shadows began to cloud my vision, clawing and biting at my consciousness with hands of darkness.

I was gone within seconds, my body and soul fragmented into trillions of tiny particles that were sent with shattering velocity into the unknown.

* * *

><p>There was nothing.</p>

I was nothing.

There was no world, there was no time, there was no space.

And therefore there was no me.

I felt otherworldly; unbound by the laws and logics of the previous world. I was no longer chained to the physical and mental, I was set free to explore the infinites and discoveries of a higher enlightenment.

I could create universes and worlds with a single command, and could form intricate dimensions of space and time within an ethereal plane of law and order. I was a god in my own realm of nothingness, drawn in to existence by the fact that I was only dreaming.

Or was it a dream? It all felt so real. Was I dreaming?

Recollection and reality grasped me with powerful hands: a rude awakening for a dreamer.

I began to feel myself being melded together into a single being; fragment by fragment, piece by piece. Soul was the stone and worldliness was the mortar, and no matter how hard I struggled to break free and achieve that height of godliness again, it never came.

I was human again.

* * *

><p>As one I converged and formed in a golden blaze, gasping wildly for air as I fell down into the bed of water. I swallowed in large gulps of air and ripped my helmet away, vomiting involuntarily and shouting in agony as my lungs continued to burn.</p>

I struggled to catch my breath and calmed myself, watching the greenish splotch of phlegm swirl and mix around inside the small river of gray water below me.

"Chief!"

"I'm ok." I told the AI with a cough, lowering my hand into the bed of water and grabbing my helmet. I let the gray liquid spill from the helm's interior before placing it back onto my head.

I rose to my feet, lungs and body aching as I stood knee-deep in the gray water. My armor felt heavier than it had ever felt before, and the Vagabond was placed tightly against the magnetic plates on my back.

I felt tired, both mentally and physically. I wanted nothing more than to fall to the floor and sleep the world away. With any luck I would drown within the murky water.

The world around me was dark and lifeless; as if I had materialized

in the solemn gates of oblivion.

I was inside a room with seemingly no end. There were no walls. No ceiling. No doors. No light.

It was cold. Damp. Silent. Ominous.

"Solace?" I yelled as I took a few steps forward, feeling my armored legs battle through the gray water.

No response.

A soft green glow began to illuminate my body and I glanced down at my right arm, noticing that I was holding onto a small, metallic orb; its surface emblazoned with ancient runes and symbols. The orb emitted a soft green aura that seemed to send waves of comforting warmth through my blood.

The Gate key.

"SOLACE!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, causing thousands of small needles to jab at my windpipe. I coughed and wheezed, my eyes watering from the searing pain.

In frustration I thrust my feet through the sludgy water and began to walk. I willed my feet to move onwards through the aching and the pain, counting three hundred steps before stopping.

I fell to my knees and grabbed my thighs, tightening my eyes and wincing in suffering. I allowed myself to fall face first into the murky water, my arms outstretched as I was submerged completely. I turned and placed the side of my helmet against the solid floor, closing my eyes and forcing myself to rest.

* * *

><p>When I awoke again I was gasping for air, swallowing pints of sludgy water into my screaming lungs. I fought against my soreness and forced my body to rise, lifting my head out of the water and fumbling to unseal the helmet.</p>

I finally managed to unseal the helmet and rip it away from me; rivulets of water cascading down from it and splashing into the sea below. I took long, gulps of air into my body, refueling my burning heart and lungs.

When I was certain that I could breathe normally I placed the helmet back on my head, staring out into the limitless vacuum of darkness around me.

There was no beginning here; no end. There was no light save for the gentle glow of the orb in my hands. The world was dark and silent; waiting for the lone intruder to die slowly and painfully.

"Cortanaâ€|" I called in a faltering voice, taking a step forward through the dark muck. "Where are we?"

"This isn't possibleâ€|I've seen this readings countless times before, but never at a caliber like thisâ€|So this is what it's

likeâ€| fascinatingâ€|" the AI murmured, more to herself than to me.

"What isn't possible? What readings? Just what the hell is going on?!" I asked her, frustrated and desperate.

"Chief," she began, a hint of disbelief in her voice. "We're inside of an artificial Black Hole."

28. III: Crossroads

"_The Chief is dead. We have confirmed that, and it's time that the world accepts it._"

Lord Hood, circa 2560

* * *

><p>Chapter Four: Crossroads

JOHN

Date: Unknown (ANOMALY) / Location: Unknown (ANOMALY)

"John."

"â€| "

"John, wake up."

"I am up."

I allowed my eyelids to slide apart, wincing in pain as the bright light rushed in to greet my retinas. I shut them almost instantly, groaning as I attempted to drift back into the familiar land of dreams.

"John!"

"Hm?"

"Mendez is coming."

I bolted upright and snapped my eyes open, chest pounding as I leaped out of the small cot. My eyes darted around the barracks as I searched for the CPO, fearing the impending wrath he could incur.

Kelly laughed as she watched me, a wide smile on her face. "I knew that would work."

"Not funny." I told her, sighing. "I almost had a heart attack."

She giggled and came closer, wrapping her gentle arms around me. I held her, a soft smile on my face as I gazed into her lovely eyes.

"Fred's waiting for you on the training grounds." She told me as she

kissed my neck.

"Maybe I should just stay here and spend time with you. Fred can wait." I told her.

"Mendez won't like that." She said in a quiet voice.

"I find it hard to care." I answered, moving my lips to hers.

I kissed her softly, feeling her gentle lips as she pressed them into mine.

A sudden burning sensation began to grow on my back, starting off as an annoying itch before growing into searing pain. It felt like I was being cut across my shoulder blades with dozens of tiny needles, each one curved and peeling away ribbons of flesh.

"Ah." I winced as I broke away from her, my back burning intensely. I looked over my shoulder to try and catch a glimpse of what was causing the pain, but to no avail.

"John? What's wrong?" I heard Kelly ask, concern in her voice.

"Ah, it's nothing." I told her, as I turned back to look into her eyes.

In Kelly's place stood a shriveled girl with gray skin and bloodshot eyes; blue veins pressing up against her rotting flesh and patches of hair missing from her head. In her mouth sat broken and shattered teeth, and long claws sat at her sides, with fresh blood dripping from the nails.

I stared at Kelly with wide eyes, frozen from fear.

"John?" she whispered in a soft, familiar voice. She moved, shoving one of her clawed hands into my chest and ripping it through the other side. I gurgled loudly as blood rushed up my throat and dripped from my lips. Her arm was stuck within my chest, piercing my lungs and sending rivulets of crimson flowing down onto the floor.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her demonic face filled with concern.

Time and space seemed to rush away as my mind was snatched away from my dying body, pulled by unseen hands back into the dark depths of oblivion. Memories, thoughts, and dreams were whisked away as I fell down into the unknown, my mind submerged in an eternal prison of sorrowful damnation.

A blast of life seemed to resurrect me from the pits of hell; waves of rejuvenating force revitalizing my fragmented soul.

I swallowed in large gulps of air and willed my body to rise, breaking the watery tension and shattering the bonds of the world I had been trapped within.

I found myself gasping for air as I sat within a sea of dark water, a familiar world of impending darkness encasing me.

I shook my head and ran my armored fingers through my hair, trying to

calm my panicked mind and body.

When I was certain that I was still sane and calm I scrounged through the murky depths for my helmet, grabbing it tightly and pulling it free from the water. I placed it over my head, inhaling deeply as I enjoyed the filtered air.

"Chief?" I heard a familiar voice speak from behind me.

I turned, quickly using my arms to shield my visor from the intense blue light that radiated through the shadowed dark. Within seconds my visor polarized, and I risked looking at the intense figure standing before me.

Cortana stood six feet tall atop the murky water, her blue feet hovering gracefully above the ripples. She looked as she always did: blue formed with runic designs covering her slender figure. Sparks of jittery electricity shot across her body at blazing intervals, and she gazed back at me with striking blue eyes.

I stared at her in complete shock, unable to comprehend what my eyes were seeing.

"Chief, something's wrong!" she gasped, her eyes wide with terror.

She turned and fled, running down the dark and shattered corridor of the Forward Unto Dawn and disappearing from view.

"Cortana!" I shouted, slamming my fists against the frosted glass that sealed me within the cryo-tube. The back of the massive ship shrieked and broke apart into a thousand heated pieces, separating as they drifted away from the ship and into the vast expanses of space beyond. Stars were burning like colossal flames within the dark space, and Delta Halo hovered silently below as dozens of bright explosions broke its surface.

I shouted and tried to break the frozen glass to no avail, watching in panic as the cryo-tube slid away from the ruined ship and began to float out into space.

A Spartan in black armor grabbed ahold of my pod and pressed his visor against the glass, peering back at me. He used one of his hands to unseal his helmet and push it off of his face, allowing it to float gently back into the dark of space.

Linda glared down at me with cold eyes, a deep frown upon her pale face. "It's okay, John. You were always the lucky one."

"It was only a nightmare, John." My mother told me as she caressed my hair, a comforting smile upon her face. She lowered down to tuck me back into my bed, giving me a warm kiss on the forehead. "Go back to sleep."

I watched her as she stood, the smile unfaltering.

"I am a monument to all your sins." Thel Vadam spoke in a grim voice as he stood beside my mother, his once olden armor drenched in dripping crimson. His eyes were black and lifeless, and my father's severed head was held by the hair in his left hand.

He lifted his right hand and placed the barrel of the plasma rifle to my mother's skull, pulling the trigger and splattering her brain matter across my face.

The Arbiter kicked her carcass away and grabbed me by the chest, pulling me upwards and into the fiery madness beyond.

"Stop!" I shouted, but the voice was not my own.

"This isn't him!"

"You lie!"

"Where is he!"

"Spartans never die."

"Truth!"

"Solace!"

"Drop all hope and embrace insanity."

I stood before the Gravemind, its green mass enveloping the darkness and overpowering the world itself.

"_All things must wither and die, but corruption remains unchanged. No matter how hard you fight, in the end you will fall by the hands of fate._"

Drowning.

I rose through despair and broke the seal again, and the demons all but vanished.

I sat amongst the murky waters, gasping for breaths and feeling my mind slowly begin to snap. Thoughts were nothing but restraints holding back the impending delirium, while radical emotions served as soldiers piercing the veil of rational sanity with swords of shadowed hate.

"You could have saved me, chief." A voice.

I looked up with watered eyes, letting out a whimper of terror as Miranda Keyes walked towards me, needler spikes protruding from her back and her torso bloodied.

"You could have saved me." She repeated, her eyes blank and without spark. "If you had been faster. Stronger. Focused."

"You're weak." Avery Johnson spat, grabbing my shoulder and lifting me to my feet. "You are weak and because of that we were the ones to pay the price."

"I shouldn't have trusted you." Captain Jacob Keyes announced as he came to my side, disappointment in his dead eyes. His head was caved in on one side, and a bloodied CNI chip sat atop his forehead. "I should've known you'd fail."

"You left us to die." Chanted hundreds of marines as they walked towards me, their bodies dismembered, mangled, and altered by the Flood.

"How could you?" Dr. Halsey asked me as she looked upon me with sad eyes. "You were supposed to be our hero, John."

They vanished.

Darkness.

Nothing but the swallowing shadows and the murky depths below.

A single figure pierced the veil, dressed in MJOLNIR armor as he approached. "John?"

I backed away, my heart pounding in fear.

"John, what's the matter?" Kelly asked, concern on her face. She looked as she always had: beautiful.

"Stay away from me." I told her, taking a few cautious steps backwards. "This isn't real, you aren't you."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, confused.

I grabbed the M6D at my side and held the magnum tightly, aiming it at her forehead.

She stopped, raising her hands in surrender. "Johnâ€¦what's happening to you?"

"SHUT UP!" I snapped, my heart racing faster.

She grew silent, fear in her eyes.

"Chief," Cortana whispered from inside my helmet. "What-"

"STOP!" I shouted in a panicked voice, ripping the helmet off of my head and throwing it aside.

"What are you doing to me?" I asked Kelly, my magnum raised again.

"What are you talking-"

I pulled the trigger, sending a bullet into the black water at her feet.

"Answer me!" I ordered.

Kelly laughed, a cold, sinister laugh that sent chills through my spine.

"You're dehydrated. You're starving. You're oxygen intake is low." She told me plainly. "It's the perfect recipe."

"For what?" I asked, taking a threatening step forward.

"Delirium. Dementia. Insanity. Rampancy." Kelly answered. "It has

many words; take your pick."

"What?"

"The human mind can only take so much punishment, John, and yours is far beyond its breaking point. There was no Ark. There was no Flood. There was no Gravemind. There was no Halo." She explained, a grin on her face.

"You lie." I spat at the bitch.

"It was all inside of your fucked up little mind." She laughed again.

I shook my head, sweat falling into my eyes.

"Where are you, John?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I do. Do you want to know?" she asked me, curious.

"I don't want to hear your lies."

"Right now you're lying in a white cot with dozens of multi-colored tubes sticking into your pathetic body. There's a television on in the corner of the room, but you're not awake to notice. A nurse has to force feed you gelatinous shit every few hours and change your fucking diaper, and you hearts growing weaker with every passing moment." She said, her fierce eyes glaring back at me. "You're broken, John. You're nothing but a weak, worthless sack of shit that is only alive because humans take pity upon you."

"Shut up." I told her, shaking my head.

"You're stuck. You're in limbo."

"Shut up!"

"And I'm here to pull the plug."

I squeezed the trigger, sending a metal bullet deep into her brain. Kelly shot back and fell down into the rippling water. She lived no more, her body sinking down into the depths and disappearing.

"There's only one way to find out." I whispered as I stared at the magnum.

I placed the barrel in my mouth and bit down, taking a final breath before pulling the trigger and feeling my head explode.

* * *

><p>"Chief! John, wake up!"</p>

I could barely hear Cortana's words over the ringing in my head.

My entire body was a vessel for pain. My stomach was ablaze with aches, my lungs burned for air, and my mind was boiling in searing

agony.

"John I need you to stay awake! Your body is slowly starting to shut down and you're going into Cardiac Arrest!"

I was kneeling in the black water, my hands placed weakly on my armored thighs.

In my left hand was the Gate Key: the small orb was glowing with a soft, yellow light.

A comforting light appeared in front of me, fighting off the endless world of darkness and shining with the brilliance of a thousand suns.

A shimmering doorway of light towered before me, inviting me into the comforting paradise beyond.

"Chief!"

I stood, willing my weakened body forward as I collapsed inside the wall of light. I felt my body dissipate and break away within the warm light.

With resounding thunder the doorway closed shut behind me.

29. III: A Storm of Sentinels

"_They say Reach was the worst battlefield in human history. Clearly they haven't been to Eden yet._"

Brigadier General Deseron, Circa 2563

* * *

><p>Chapter Five: A Storm of Sentinels

* * *

><p>VANGUARD

**September 8, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ UNSC Fortress City
Eden.**

Trenches. Again.

I should've seen it coming; I mean I watched the marines dig the damn things yesterday. I guess I just didn't see myself fighting inside them again; let alone commanding an entire battalion of soldiers as well. Admiral Briggs had put Deseron and me in charge of the trench lines, despite my complaints and protests.

And that meant that we were the only thing standing between the coming horde of Covenant and Eden's walls.

"This looks familiarâ€|" Hercules chuckled as he placed his armored hands on the dirt wall below him. "Are ya gonna ask me to throw you into the air like a baseball again?"

"Fuck off, soldier." I told him, my mood turning sour. I was a Brigadier General, for fucks sake! I deserved to be on the city walls, commanding the main attack force alongside Tiger, Armstrong, Cutter, and every other goddamn commander in this damned place!

"Damn you Briggsâ€!" I mumbled as I stood, allowing the overturned helmet filled with raw eggs to fall onto the ground. I had lost my appetite for breakfast.

The bitter wind clawed and snapped at my face and hair as I collected my helm, feeling chills and shivers course through my blood. I quickly placed the helm over my head and sealed it in place, sighing in pleasure as the internal heating system kicked in.

For once, I was warm.

And I couldn't say the same for the three hundred marines around me.

Soldiers were huddled into tight groups and shivering loudly as they manned their positions and weapons, their helms covered in snow and frost. There weren't enough cloaks to go around, so some marines were forced to rub their hands against their frigid arms to keep from freezing in their simple battle armor. Their faces were pale and their frowns were deep, but they knew their duty and what they may have to sacrifice to uphold it.

I snorted, taking off my own cloak and offering it to the closest marine. He thanked me gingerly and took the fur, wrapping it around his body and arms.

Less than two kilometers away marched the Covenant armada. Thousands upon thousands of the purple troops stomped through the snowy plains, followed by rolling Wraiths, ghosts, and dozens of phantom dropships that buzzed overhead. Three Covenant cruisers loomed in the gray sky, their hulking forms blocking out the weak sun and creating dim darkness across the plains.

We were outnumbered five-to-one. That was fact; not an estimate or a guess.

But Hood believed we'd survive, and so did Briggs, and Cutter, and Tiger, maybe not Armstrong, but Legacy did, and Gizmo: the list goes on.

I couldn't care less, to be honest. When your life is given a huge stamp that says '**YOU WILL DIE IN SIX MONTHS**,' you stop caring about the little things in life.

All I cared about now was taking all of those Covie sons of bitches with me.

"The chain guns and heavy calibers are in place and ready to go. Snipers and rocket jockeys are providing support from the wall and every marine has a rifle and some grenades." Legacy-343 reported as she stepped up to my side, her silver helm masking her beauty.

"So are we ready?" I asked her. We weren't.

"As ready as we'll ever be. If this weather keeps up then we'll all die of frostbite and fever instead of Covenant weaponry." She sighed.

"Glad to see that you're still optimistic." I told her.

"Don't think about getting yourself killed here either, Jack. We still have a deal." She said, a smile no doubt on her face.

"No promises."

I lifted my head and peered behind the Spartan, spying Deseron as he made his way towards us; arms crossed over a thick cloak and frost forming on his short beard.

"Is everyone ready?" the Brigadier General asked as he stood beside me, his breaths exiting as small vaporous clouds.

"Not exactly, but we'll manage. How are you holding up?" I asked him.

"My ears are purple and all the sperm in my balls have frozen over." He grumbled, shaking icicles from his beard.

"That's gross." I chuckled, shaking my head.

"I've never been in command of this many marines before. Things were a lot easier when I only had to look after Delta. I'm afraid I'm gonna give a wrong order and get everyone killed." Deseron admitted, frowning.

"That's why I'm here, my friend." I told him, patting him lightly on the shoulder.

"General!" Legacy called out, causing both Deseron and me to turn towards her.

She was pointing out towards the ocean of purple armor, her finger becoming covered in snow.

I turned my head, noticing what had caught her attention.

"They've stoppedâ€|" Deseron murmured as he watched the Covenant horde, realizing that their feet had ceased moving.

Whispers and murmurs erupted through the trenches as soldiers eyed the Covenant army cautiously, their hands never leaving the triggers of their weapons. Unease was beginning to fill the air like locusts, grabbing onto marines and never letting go.

I swallowed and turned to peer back at the massive wall behind us, spotting Admiral Briggs as she stood with pride atop the steel. Her ceremonial sword was gripped tightly in her hands, and her striking eyes were staring ahead.

I clicked the safety off of my rifle and took a deep breath, drowning the slight fear that had managed to creep its way into my heart.

"I've never been on a true battlefield beforeâ€|" I heard Legacy

whisper as she stood beside me.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Valor Team specializes in covert Black Operations, not open warzones." She explained, her breathing quickening.

"You'll be fine. It's kind of like riding a bike." I told her, turning back to the forces ahead of us. "You have to fall and break your legs before you learn to ride it properly."

An ear-splitting blare filled the cold wind and sent chills down my spine. Whispers erupted from the trench line, and Deseron shouted for them to cease.

Loud booms shook the ground as the blaring continued, its source lying somewhere amidst the lines of Covenant soldiers.

I cursed and stumbled as the very ground beneath me started to shake with growing strength.

"What's going on?!" Deseron shouted nearby as he struggled to stay standing.

A massive leg shot forth from amidst the host of covenant soldiers and stood amongst the gray sky, its purple armoring glimmering a vibrant color within the storm. The enormous leg bent at the makeshift knee and plummeted down onto the ground again, sending a new shockwave through the plains.

Marines around the trench line began to panic at the sight of the purple limb, shouting and screaming as they struggled to keep their morale.

Another purple leg shot out of the horde and slammed into the ground as well, followed shortly by two more. Within seconds four gigantic legs stood bent among the thousands of covenant soldiers, reaching at least fifty feet into the air and glimmering with ominous light.

The legs began to rise and straighten with the hiss of grinding metal, lifting the body of the dreaded machine into the air. Two metallic, curved horns jutted out of the machine's triangular head, and a glowing red orb formed the massive eye that sat in the center of its head. Jagged spikes stretched down its back and through its jointed, scorpion-like tail. A black pincer was attached to the tip of its tail, emanating a deathly crimson.

The colossus lifted its head and let out a bone-chilling shriek, its cry seeming to cause the very airwaves to vibrate furiously.

"What the hell is that thing?!" Deseron shouted to me as he shielded his ears from the intense shriek.

"I don't knowâ€|" I murmured, staring at the enormous beast.

Eight more legs shot out of the horde as two more of the colossus machines stood and faced us, their eyes burning as they towered over the thousands below.

The covenant soldiers raised their weapons into the air and let loose

valiant roars of defiance, shaking the ground and the snow with their chants and cries.

As one they moved and charged towards Eden and the trenches; moving like a purple wave of strength and might.

"Fire! Let loose with everything you've got!" Van shouted as he watched the horde come, swallowing the creeping fear in his gut. His orders were carried along the line and soon the sound of gunfire trumpeted through the howling wind.

"Outgoing mortar and artillery strike!" Deseron shouted to Van over the shouts and the thunder of fire.

"Give em hell!" Van replied as he lifted his rifle and slapped a fresh magazine into the frame.

The world seemed to explode around him as the massive MAC cannons stationed upon the city walls fired and sent shells of burning death into the covenant ranks. Scorched bodies filled the air and craters of black char and fire were left in the snow as they bombarded the incoming horde.

The covenant braved the bombardments and continued their charge; coming dangerously close to the marines within the trenches. They opened fire with a variety of weapons as they plowed through the snow.

The colossal machines behind them soon began to take timid steps towards Eden's walls, causing the ground to shake with each step forward.

"Strike Package Omega-59 inbound!" Deseron reported. Van nodded and looked to the sky.

A squad of six longsword appeared through the grey clouds and strafed over the covenant frontlines, dropping a myriad of explosives into the air before they were shot down by the covenant cruisers and the colossal machines.

The explosives detonated when they impacted with the ground and created a vast wall of fire that ravaged the covenant infantry and the snow.

Van squeezed the trigger and felled the soldiers that managed to crawl away from the searing flames, their bodies cooked and burning.

"LOOK OUT!" Legacy shouted as she grabbed him and threw him onto the ground. The world was engulfed in a display of intense light and heat as the ground became vaporized and melted.

Within seconds they were weightless; their limbs flailing as they fell through the cold air. Van shouted in pain when his back slammed against the hard trench floor, and Legacy soon found herself struggling to breathe as she lay on his chest.

A twenty yard crater marked where they had once stood: a massive hole of black snow and dirt that stretched as far back as the city walls.

Van grunted as he struggled to stand, grabbing Legacy by the shoulder and lifting her as well.

"Deseron!" he croaked as he searched for the remains of the soldier. He found none.

Marines were shouting and firing and cursing as they returned to their posts on the trench line, not even bothering to clear the crater of the dozens of dead carcasses that littered it.

Van looked out into the plains, realizing that the colossal closest to them was preparing for another attack.

"Somebody take that goddamn thing out before it destroys the entire trench line!" Van shouted as he shoved Legacy away and walked through the trench.

Hercules appeared by his side, a rocket launcher hefted upon his shoulder. "There's nothing we can do to stop those things without air support! They'll rip us to shreds before we can cause any real damage!"

"Then we're done," Van realized. It was hopeless. They could not win.

The colossal fired again, a red beam of concentrated energy slamming into the snow directly in front of the trench. The covenant soldiers charging around the blast radius were instantly vaporized and disintegrated.

"Here they come!"

"Get into positions!"

"Rifles up front, give em hell!"

Van turned and faced the coming army, pressing down the trigger and sending fire and bullets into the bodies of grunts and jackals. The marines around him laid down as much suppressive fire as they could, but the covenant offensive would neither falter nor slow their advance.

Another barrage from the MAC cannons decimated small pockets of the covenant armada, but more rose to replace the dead and continue the charge.

"Keep fighting! Don't give up!" Hercules shouted to the soldiers as they began to abandon their positions and run back towards the city.

It was hopeless.

The colossal machines were a mere kilometer away from reaching the city walls, and the massive cruiser above were preparing to glass the entire UNSC defensive.

They had lost.

Eden.

Spira.

Earth.

All had been lost.

"Incoming freighter!" Brigg's voice boomed through my helmet like defiant thunder. I ignored her words and kept on fighting, slapping my last magazine into my rifle.

There was no way a freighter would come to our rescue. We had no available air support.

Then I was proven wrong.

A great shadow was cast upon the plains, and the bitter skies were shrouded with looming darkness. I stopped and lifted my head, watching in awe as a massive ship of steel and iron descended from the grey clouds and the frost gales.

The marines around me roared and cheered as they watched the massive freighter descend. Cavalry had finally arrived.

"Something's wrong." The voice was Briggs.

There were multiple holes and hull breaches upon the freighter, and it fell through the air with fire and flames engulfing its frame. MAC cannons and heavy artillery shells were sent bombarding into the covenant legions, blowing large craters of charred rock into the snowy plains and vaporizing the soldiers around them.

The towering colossals lifted their glowing eyes to the ship and shot beams of concentrated energy into the sky. The ship screeched and wailed as the beams tore through its hull, yet it continued to fire upon the hordes of purple armor and flesh.

"What's going on?" I asked no one in particular as I activated my COMM and rejoined the fight.

"UNSC Battle-Freighter-0147, Delta Division Artillery-Vessel," replied Briggs again, her voice panicked. "_Zeus's Hammer_! That ship was destroyed over ten years ago back on the Ark!"

"W-what?!" I stammered, watching as the ship fell through the air like a comet. "How is that possible?"

"Van, call a full retreat!" Briggs ordered him, her voice cracking. "Call it now!"

"Why? What is it? What's going on?!" I demanded.

The marines around me were in a panicked frenzy, firing upon the oncoming covenant and trading glances up at the descending freighter. Legacy, Hercules, and Gizmo were nowhere to be found, and I feared that Deseron had lost his life during the first attack.

"Vanguard!" Briggs shouted, catching my attention. "That ship was overrun by the flood back on the Ark!"

Chunks and fragments of the ship were beginning to detach and fall like rain down towards the battlefield, and the ship was ever closer to impacting with the planet. Men, jackals, grunts, and elites all ran in fear as the ship came upon them, blocking out the sun and threatening to crush them all.

With a resounding clap of thunder and a haze of fire and flames the massive freighter slammed into a cowering colossal and fell onto the ground in a powerful shockwave. The planet seemed to wail and scream as the ship exploded and split into a thousand pieces, sending a deafening earthquake through the land and knocking me off of my feet.

The walls surrounding Eden cracked as long scars and tremors broke through their surface, and the large buildings threatened to shatter and fall upon the marines below them.

The air was filled with the shouts, screams, and bellow of pain and agony from the people scattered across the battlefield. Distant explosions killed countless more and filled the carrier winds with their screams.

Then there was silence. An eerie, unsettling, foreboding silence.

Then there was flood.

They leapt and ran and lunged out of the broken ship and the shattered fragments in hordes of hundreds, clawing and biting and crushing the helpless soldiers that cowered around them. They were men and women and elites that had been killed and consumed and changed by the green parasites, and they looked upon the battlefield with dead, lifeless eyes.

I stood and gazed upon the battered plains and the blood soaked snow, unable to comprehend what I was seeing. There was death, and suffering, and slaughter, and the shambling dead.

We were no longer at war with the covenant.

We were now at war with survival itself.

"Move, move, move!" I shouted to the marines crying and fleeing around me, shoving them back. "Get to the city walls!"

I needed to find my team. I needed to find Legacy.

The covenant armies and their colossals were busy dealing with the sudden arrival of the parasites, which would allow us time to retreat and regroup within the city.

I didn't have time to fear. I didn't have time to panic.

A scorched piece of the freighter's hull had crashed into a tuft of snow several yards to my left, and I looked over to find three marines shrieking in agony as a dozen green, bulbous blobs with tentacles pierced their armor and their necks and their flesh.

I quickly ran over and fired upon the small orbs, grimacing in disgust when they exploded and died. One of the marines had been

stabbed in the eye by one of the parasites and he was reeling upon the snow, screaming in agony as the foreign alien ripped his face apart.

I offered him a bullet to end his suffering, and he died with a hole in his forehead and the remains of an alien upon his face.

I moved on, towards the far plains where the colossals stood and the shipwreck sat. the covenant legions ran about the plains as their purple armor became melded with the brown and the green and the black of the flood.

"Van we don't have a lot of time," I heard Briggs voice say. "The flood will attack the city before everyone is able to get to safety."

"I know," I told her, firing upon a lone flood form that had managed to crawl out of a fallen hull fragment. "But there's still time."

Briggs and the marines behind the wall were continuing to fire artillery shells upon the covenant and the flood, trying to buy us precious time to flee to the city.

I shouted my orders to the soldiers and marines running around me, but whether they heard me over the roars and the chaos, I did not know.

I found Hercules and Gizmo as they helped defend a small squad of marines against a pack of jogging flood forms. Hercules crushed their skulls and the orbs within their mangled chests while Gizmo fired upon them with his MA6D.

"Orders?" they asked me as I reached them. Thank god they were alive.

"Full retreat. The Admiral wants us indoors before the flood reach the walls," I told them.

They nodded and ran off to relay the message to the lieutenants and corporals still in the plains.

I pressed on, cursing and falling to the snow as I watched a colossal lean and fall to the plains in a wave of sleet and frost. Flood forms jumped away from the fallen mech by the dozens, and filled the air with their shrieks and roars as they slaughtered the people around them.

An ear-splitting wail filled the air and I lifted my head, my heart skipping a beat as I looked upon the large colossal that towered directly above me. Its eye was lowered and glowing a bright red, and I cursed as I stood and struggled to get away.

The world flash red with bright light and I was once again weightless. The snow and the sky tumbled through my vision as I fell back to the ground, coughing as blood filled my lungs.

The ground shook violently as the colossal came to stand above me again, roaring defiantly as its massive eye came mere feet away from crushing my face.

"GRAAAH!" I shouted as I lifted my leg and kicked it with all my might. I shuffled away and sprinted through the snow, feeling the air heat up as the machine prepared to fire again.

I looked back in time to see the colossal become shrouded in fire and tongues of smoke as artillery slugs bombarded its form and it struggled to stay afoot.

I slid to the ground and hoisted a covenant fuel rod cannon onto my shoulder, squeezing down the trigger and praying that the weapon would fire.

"Fuck one-liners!" I shouted in defiance as the cannon flared and sent three blasts of green energy towards the colossal. The projectiles struck true and exploded upon the colossal's eye, sending it flying backwards with force.

The machine wobbled and fell down to the ground with a mighty crash.

I stood and caught my breath, my heart racing.

"Jack!" a voice screamed through my COMM.

Legacy.

"Where are you?!" I asked her as quickly, my mind racing.

A NAV marker appeared on my HUD and I quickly ran towards it, disregarding the marines and the flood and the covenant soldiers around me.

"Van where are you going?!" Briggs demanded, but I ignored her.

I was not willing to lose another Spartan.

I stopped and fired upon a group of elites that had crossed my path, tearing their bodies to shreds and covering the snow with their gore. Two flood forms had been chasing close behind them and I felled them as well before continuing on.

I reached a small clearing in the plains that was surrounded by hull pieces of _Zeus' Hammer _and stopped.

There, within the scorched snow and the pillars of fire and the charred shards of metal, stood Auron; clad in white armor and wielding a long energy sword in his left hand. He glared upon me with those familiar cold eyes, as if glad that I had finally arrived.

Legacy-343 was held in his right hand, her feet dangling above the ground as he held her in place.

I shook my head, dropping my rifle and falling to my knees. I had seen this before, and I knew how it would end.

The memory was unbearable.

"Does it depress you, demon?" he asked in a snide voice, crushing

Legacy's head within his claws. "To know just how weak you truly are?"

"No!" I murmured, shaking my head.

"I'll admit that the appearance of the parasite was an unseen distraction. I didn't realize that you pathetic humans had grown so desperate to defeat me. But it makes no difference, demon, we've stopped the parasite before and we can do it again."

Auron lifted Legacy higher and raised the energy sword, preparing to send it deep within the Spartan's chest.

"No!" I shouted, reaching out towards the Spartan to no avail.

"She will die, and I shall rise!"

Auron stopped suddenly. He coughed and droplets of blood flew from his lips and melded with the snow. Legacy was released and she fell to the ground, her breathing sporadic as she kicked her way away from the sangheili swordsman and towards me.

A blade of black, tempered steel had protruded from Auron's chest, cleaving through his armor and sending him to his knees. Auron gasped for air and gripped at the blade, his eyes wide with shock.

"I'm afraid the tables have turned," came a familiar voice as the blade was pulled from Auron's chest.

Auron fell to the ground, wheezing and gasping for air as he flailed and twitched upon the snow.

A Spartan clad in solid black armor stood above the sangheili warrior. He had pale skin and long black hair, and his face was cluttered with white scars. His armor was dented and scratched and charred, yet he wore it uncaring. His right arm was made of steel and spiked guards, and he held the black sword tightly in his metal fingers.

With abnormal speed the Spartan lifted the sword and brought it down upon Auron's neck, cleaving through his throat and separating his head from his body.

"You should've killed me when you had the chance," Zeke spat as he whipped the blade through the air and sprayed the swordsman's blood across the deep snow.

30. III: A Dance with Demons

"_Ignorant boys sit down to play at war with petty smiles and a false sense of pride, but only hardened men with nothing left to lose rise to win the endless game. You're a boy, Vanguard, and a fool; and you were doomed to lose the game of war just like all the other Spartan filth before you._"

General Armstrong, Circa 2563

* * *

><p>Chapter Six: A Dance with Demons

VANGUARD

September 8, 2563 (Estimated Military Time) \ UNSC Fortress City Eden.

The world was silent. I couldn't hear the sounds of war blaring around me. I couldn't hear the whines of plasma fire or the heavy gunfire that boomed like spears of thunder. I couldn't hear the cries of the dying and the final breaths of the newly deceased. I couldn't even hear my own heartbeat.

I could do nothing but stare at Zeke in complete shock and awe. He stood as though he had been by my side the whole time; his face pale and his shoulders broad. He looked the way he had when we had stood in front of Armstrong at the crevice; proud and brave and noble. Legacy scrambled to my side and turned back to stare at the black-armored Spartan as well, as if thinking that he was more ghost than man.

Zeke stood over the corpse of the Sangheili warrior Auron, dark blood falling from his sword and covering the thick snow.

And then he fell.

His pupils rolled into the back of his head and his legs gave out from under him, and Legacy barely managed to catch his limp form before he fell onto the ground.

The chaotic warzone around us seemed to unpause and the sounds of bloody battle raced into my explosions rocked the plains below me and the constant storm of fire and blood engulfed my very soul as mortals fought, and fell, and died.

I rushed to Zeke's side, fearing for his life. "What happened?"

"I don't know, he just lost consciousness," Legacy stammered as she caressed his cheek. "His vitals are faint, Van, it's almost as if he's slowly dying."

A nearby colossal let loose a valiant screech and we covered our ears from the blaring noise.

"We need to get him out of here!" I told her, scrambling around the snow for a weapon to use. She nodded.

We swiftly grabbed the unconscious Spartan by the shoulders and struggled to lift him to his feet.

"Here," Legacy called out as she used her free hand to toss me a M6D Magnum. I caught the weapon and gave her a quick nod.

I watched as Legacy grabbed the bloody head of Auron and held it loosely in her hands. "A souvenir."

We should leave it on Odin's doorstep. I only nodded.

With incoherent shouts and squeals a squad of grunts neared our

position, arms flailing as they fled the anarchic battlefield. I wasted no time in cutting them down with the magnum, and I shouted at Legacy to follow close behind me.

As one we dragged Zeke through the blood and the snow and the war. My heart raced like a stallion as I fired off round after round from the magnum, careful to steer us clear of any nearby elites and wraith tanks. Our destination was the gates of Eden, where we could find refuge and aid for Zeke.

"Honor-Leader," came Briggs voice from my COMM.

"I'm still hereâ€|.barely," I answered her before tossing the magnum over to Legacy. She squeezed the trigger and placed a round through a jackal's eye before slapping a new magazine in the pistol and handing it back to me.

"The Silent Plains are lost, Vanguard. It was a damn foolish thing to think that we could stand against Odin's forces; we'll lose half the armada unless we retreat back into the city!" her voice was rushed and desperate.

"It's not too late, we managed to kill a covenant-"

"It is too late! I've ordered a full retreat! Get your ass back within these walls and bring as many men as you can with you! I'm sending Tiger out to find the rest of you team."

"Yes sir," I growled before cutting the connection.

"Come on," I ordered Legacy as I quickened my pace.

The plains were filled with terrible death. Hundreds of bodies lay strewn about in the red snow, their faces blue and covered in frost. Downed phantoms and destroyed ghosts sat in burning ruins amidst the blackened craters and wreckage, and the injured living cried and screamed as they awaited their imminent deaths.

We dragged Zeke through it all. Fire was upon the ridges and our enemies had surrounded us, yet we persisted. I shouted my orders to passing marines and colonels and they carried on the message as well, their faces shrouded in confusion and dread.

They knew that we had lost the plains. Hell, we never even had it to begin with.

The large cannons upon the city walls roared and sent searing fireballs towards the walking mechs, and the air was filled with purple and green bolts of energy as the mechs fired back at the city. I watched as a lone skyscraper was hit and cut in two, before exploding into a thousand shards and falling into the city streets.

"Van!" Tiger shouted through my COMM.

"Tell me that you've got some good newsâ€|" I replied as I clenched my teeth and led Zeke forward.

"I found Deseron! He's battered and bruised, but he's alright. The damn bastard was sent sky-high when that first colossal attacked

you!" Tiger said, his voice barely carrying over the gunfire.

"It'll take a lot more than a giant-terror-death-mecha to stop this son-bitch!" I heard Deseron shout through the COMM.

I let out a sigh of relief. "And the others?"

"Still M.I.A. My guess is that Hercules and Gizmo are off on their own somewhere in the plains, but I have no doubt that they've heard Briggs orders by now."

"Van!" Legacy shouted as she suddenly dropped Zeke. I turned to her and found her pointed to the far right, where an Elite Major was slowly making his way towards us; a fuel rod cannon held in his hands.

"Uh, we could use some help over here, Tiger," I said as I placed a NAV Marker at our position on the HUD.

I slowly stepped away from Zeke and Legacy and raised the magnum towards the Sangheili, attempting to draw its attention away from the two Spartans behind me.

The elite fired a volley of green energy towards me and I quickly rolled to the side. The ground seemed to overheat and melt beneath me as the energy clashed into the plains and the snow vaporized.

I rose to my feet and fired a trio of rounds at the Elite, who merely laughed as the bullets were deflected by his shields.

"Foolish demon," the Elite chuckled as he prepared to send another volley towards me, "you will need something bigger than that if you wish to stop me."

With the force of a meteor the flaming remains of a phantom dropship crashed into the plains and reduced the elite to a puddle of dark blood, guts, and grime.

I shouted and shielded my eyes from the blast, feeling my heart skip a beat.

"Let's go!" Legacy shouted back to me as she struggled to lift Zeke. I ran back to her side and hefted the Spartan up, and soon we were racing through the burning plains again.

The battle around us was turning sour. The UNSC troops that didn't have the sense to retreat were being slaughtered and cut down by the advancing Covenant, and the battle was quickly becoming a massacre.

I dropped my magnum and picked up a MA5B from a smoldering weapon was black and covered in grey smoke, but I was more than sure that I could still use it.

We rounded a downed wraith tank and came face-to-face with a trio of jackal skirmishers. I involuntarily fired and spilled their blood upon the tank before continuing onwards.

"Van where are you?!" it was Briggs again.

"We're coming!" I told her, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. I clenched my teeth and shook my head, realizing that we were still a ways away from the city gates. Legacy was becoming exhausted and Zeke seemed to weigh more with each passing second.

We wouldn't make it in time.

"Get down!" I shouted as I quickly threw Legacy, Zeke and myself onto the ground. A myriad of MAC rounds flashed above us and slammed into the hull of a towering colossal, exploding in an array of bright light and smoke and destroying the entire mech. The colossal swayed dangerously on two feet before falling to the ground, crushing and smothering the Covenant soldiers below it.

A mighty roar unlike any I have ever heard before erupted through the plains with feral dominance. I looked back towards the Covenant hordes, feeling a knot form in my gut as I feared what evils had arisen to haunt me.

With a vicious blast of thunder the destroyed wraith tank we had just passed sent flying through the cold air in two shredded pieces. I yelped and hastily lowered my head, mere inches away from becoming decapitated.

There, standing with might and fury between the scorched remnants of the Covenant tank, towered a grey Jiralhanae. The beast was easily twelve feet tall, with rippling muscles and the resemblance of a great ape forged from the hellish winds of some nightmarish storm. It had ice-blue eyes and a long beard of white hair, and its large body was encased in blood-red armor. A great gravity hammer was strapped to its back, and red war-paint ran across its face.

"Oh shitâ€|" I cursed, feeling my morale plummet.

"There's no wayâ€|the Brutes and the Elites have been lifelong enemies for years! Why would one choose to fight for a Sangheili Warlord?!" Legacy gasped as she stared at the beast.

The Brute warrior lifted its head and opened its maws, releasing a triumphant roar that seemed to shake the entire world.

"I AM DECIMUS AGAMEMTUS, LORD OF THE JIRALHANAE AND DESTROYER OF PLANETS!" the beast bellowed as it slammed its fists into the ground. "NONE HAVE FACED ME ON THE BATTLEFIELD AND LIVED TO TELL OF IT, AND NONE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PIERCE THE HIDE OF MY FLESH! I AM THE GOD OF WAR AND THE BRINGER OF DEATH, FOR ALL MORTALS FALL PREY TO THE DESTRUCTIONS OF MY FISTS AND MY HAMMER!"

"And why would a god pledge allegiance to a mere Sangheili?" I shouted to the beast, testing my luck.

The beast looked down upon me, as if noticing me for the first time. "ODIN IS GOD OF THE GREAT JOURNEY AND PROPHET OF THE GODS, AND I GLADLY BETRAYE DMY OWN RACE TO SERVE AS HIS FORSWORN!"

Forsworn? I looked down to legacy, and the head that was gripped tightly in her hand.

"GRUUAAHH!" Decimus screamed in rage as he followed my gaze and noticed Auron's head. "YOU HAVE SLAIN THE BLADE OF WINDS!"

I grabbed the head and shoved Legacy away, "go. Run. Now!"

She nodded and grunted loudly as she struggled to drag Zeke's unconscious body away.

When she was clear I turned back to the Brute, accepting that I was no doubt staring into the face of death.

Decimus leapt from the wreckage and came to a halt before me, splashing snow and blood and mud upon my armor. He inspected me slowly, "you are the demon in pale armor! You are the one that Lord Odin has marked as his prey!"

"If you know who I am then you know how dangerous I am," I told the beast, swallowing my creeping fear.

Decimus threw back his head and laughed heartily; blatantly insulting me. "YOU? DANGEROUS? No, little man-animal, you are not dangerous. You are but a fly in the web of the universe, trapped and squealing as you struggle to break free of your fate!"

Decimus laughed again. "And I'm the spider!"

With astounding speed the massive brute whipped his hand through the air and smacked me across the chest, sending me hurtling backwards several yards and crashing through the snow.

I coughed up blood and struggled to my feet. The beast was quickly barreling towards me, yellow teeth bared and hands clenched into tight fists.

"Uh, Hercules? Are you there?" No reply.

"I could really use a large red Spartan right about now!" I shouted desperately into the COMM.

I dove to the right just in time to avoid the charging ape, who screamed in annoyance and turned to give chase.

I found myself sprinting through the battlefield, leaping and bounding over corpses and soldiers as I tried to buy myself time. The great beast shoved, stomped, and squished all opposition in his way, roaring and sending rivulets of drool through the air.

The muscles in my legs stressed and clenched as I bolted through the warzone, completely aware of the one ton monster that was eager to rip my body asunder. I leaped into the air and planted my foot on the back of a grunt, using it to vault farther away from the beast and land on the chestplate of an elite minor.

I put a bullet in the surprised elite's brain before shouting in dread and rolling to the side. Decimus had reached me in seconds, roaring vigorously as he slammed a fist into the downed elite and reduced the Sangheili to a pile of chummy gore.

I hauled ass away from the brute warrior and made my way towards the city gates. Marines and soldiers firing around me looked upon the grey brute with wide eyes and shouts on their tongues, and many fell to their death when Decimus's wrath was unleashed upon them.

I risked whirling around and firing a magazine into the brute's belly. The bullets flashed yellow and seemed to implode when they contacted with the brute's armor, leaving him completely unharmed.

"Aw, come on," I pleaded as I turned and ran again.

A large shadow appeared from nowhere and overwhelmed me, and I lifted my head in time to see a flaming wraith tank as it fell through the air towards me. With a panicked shout I dove to the side, and the world around me exploded in a display of fire and chaos.

I was airborne yet again, my armor ablaze in tongues of red fire. I slowly descended and hit the snow hard, crying out in pain. I laid there, unable to catch my breath and calm my frenzied heart.

Decimus laughed as he neared me, his hands covered in shrapnel and blood. A marine cowering below him let out a high-pitch scream before the brute stomped upon his chest and imploded his heart.

"NO MORE RUNNING DEMON!" Decimus spat as he neared me.

I shook my head and began crawling away from the invincible beast and my impending death.

A series of low whistles echoed through the air and Decimus was hit directly in the chest with a rogue MAC round from a distant cannon. He shouted and stumbled back, his body shrouded in a large pillar of blinding fire and searing shrapnel.

"GRAAH!" I screamed as I stood and fired into the flaming pillar, releasing my vengeance upon the beast and praying that it would be reduced to a ragtag corpse.

The fire died down.

The fog of grey smoke withered away.

My rifle clicked empty.

And still Decimus stood.

Uninjured. Unharmed. Unkillable.

"WEAK!" Decimus the Destroyer laughed as he lunged at me. "YOU'RE TOO WEAK!"

His fist whipped about like a bullet and I felt the entire left side of my face explode in pain. My head snapped to the side and I was sent cart-wheeling into a smoldering crater a few meters away.

"YOU ARE A DEADMAN!" the beast bellowed as he appeared above me again. "AND I'M!"

He grabbed my helmet and lifted me into the air. "AM THE DEVIL!"

He released me and sent his fist into my gut with incredible force. My eyes widened and my heart stopped, and I found myself weightless.

I crashed down into the snow and the blood with a sickening thud, and I did not attempt to rise again. There was no fight left in my body.

I moved my head to the side to peer at the city gates that lied at least a kilometer away, watching with relief as I saw Legacy and a trio of marines carry Zeke into the city.

I closed my eyes. Good, at least someone made it out of here alive.

I felt a large hand wrap around my chest and wrench me forward. I was dangling in the air again, staring directly into the ugly face of Decimus Agamemtus.

"Do you have any last words before I rip your spine from your flesh?" the massive brute asked in a cold voice.

"No," I managed to wheeze, squirming like a worm within his grasp.
"But he does."

I flicked my wrist and lobbed the fragmentation grenade into the air. Decimus eyed the green ball curiously at first, before his eyes widened and he realized what it truly was.

With a crack and a clash of thunder the grenade exploded inches from Decimus's face. The beast roared in pain and backed away from the sphere of fire and heat, releasing me and allowing my beaten form to fall to the snow.

I mustered what little strength I had left and crawled away, towards the distant gates and safety.

"Van!" came a familiar shout to my left. I turned my head to find Tiger and Deseron slowly approaching, their bodies covered in grime, blood, and ash. They eyed the screaming brute cautiously, their MA5Bs lifted in the air.

"What the fuck is that thing?" Tiger asked me as he helped me to my feet.

"Forsworn," I told him, grimacing as a sharp pain erupted from my left knee. "Another one of Odin's watchdogs."

"I AM DECIMUS! I AM THE DESTROYER! I AM INVINCIBLE!"

We watched in silence as the brute thrashed and flailed with sheer ferocity, his armor charred and steaming. He glared at us with pure bloodlust before letting loose a deafening war cry.

The brute was upon us in milliseconds. Deseron cursed loudly and fired with his MA5B, but the barrage of bullets did little to stop the charging animal. The Brigadier General was swatted away like a fly and sent hurtling away and into the snow with a panicked shout.

Tiger ducked below a clumsy swing from the beast and counterattacked with a jab to the gut. His fist smashed into Decimus and sank into his ripped armor.

Tiger cursed as he struggled to free his hand before the monster could take action. Decimus launched a fist towards the Spartan who wrenched his hand free from the scarred armor and lifted it to deflect the blow.

In a flash of blue energy and green armor Gizmo shot through the air and tackled Decimus, surprising everyone and causing a wave of relief to wash over me. Decimus was thrown off balance and sent crashing onto the snow, and Gizmo was immediately atop him and launching a flurry of blows upon his face.

I struggled to my feet as Tiger leaped to Gizmo's side and began mercilessly beating the downed brute. I activated my armor's MVES and gave my body a much needed energy boost, before jumping on Tiger's back and throwing my fists down as well.

It felt like an eternity as we punched and lunched and punched at the brute warrior's face. My fists soon turned to jelly and I felt as though I was hitting a cement wall.

"WRATH!" Decimus shouted in defiance. He snarled like a wild animal and thrust his head forward, slamming it into Tiger's chest with tremendous force. Tiger was thrown away from the rising brute and me along with him, our limbs flailing wildly as we eventually came crashing down onto the wet ground.

Gizmo activated his Armor Lock in time to absorb a vicious punch from Decimus, and he quickly jumped away from the enraged monster.

"This isn't working!" Gizmo announced as he circled Decimus Agamemtus.

I inhaled deeply and allowed air to enter my burning lungs, and I coughed and sputtered as blood filled my throat. I turned and saw Tiger lying beside me, his helmet cracked and his hands gripping tightly around his chest.

His HUD status told me that he had broken two ribs, and a quick glance at my own status revealed that my lungs were beginning to fill with blood.

I cried out in pain as Decimus grabbed my chest and lifted me into the air with both hands. He roared and shouted as he held me above his head.

"DIE!" he shouted as he released me, and I fell towards the ground. My back came into contact with his armored knee and my body was filled with the most agonizing pain that I have ever felt in my entire life.

I screamed with a voice so filled with fear, pain, and despair that chills raced through my entire soul. I could feel my spine melt and morph in the fires of a thousand suns, and the world around me became dark and filled with clawing shadows.

I blacked out.

When I came to I found myself gazing upon the white crystals within the thick snow. I blinked. My ears didn't work. My body wouldn't

budge. I couldn't even move my damn fingers.

A warm comfort washed over me and I had an urge to slip into an eternal sleep. I lifted my eyes and saw a woman in blue MJOLNIR armor kneeling before me, her gentle eyes pure and filled with love.

"Let go, Jack," Selene told me in her soft voice. "Just let go."

I obeyed.

I closed my eyes, and the sweetness of her voice seemed to linger in my head.

Just let go.

* * *

><p>Voices. Footsteps. Shouts.</p>

I wanted to fall back to sleep. Fuck this damned world and its problems. I wanted to be with Selene again. I was through with being a Spartan.

I was through with being human.

More voices. They sounded distressed. Panicked.

I tried to slip away again. I failed.

I couldn't make out what the voices were saying. I stopped trying to.

I opened my eyes. At first I saw nothing, just the light of a blazing sun as it burned the world around me.

Soon my vision cleared and I could make out blurred faces and figures as they hovered around me.

Selene stood to my right, her face clear as day and perfect unlike the rest. She frowned and eyed me closely, as if longing for my attention.

Is this heaven?

"No," she muttered, reading my thoughts. "You can't go there yet."

One voice rose above the others. It was male, and it overpowered the lesser voices with relative ease.

I moved my eyes slowly to the side and saw a black figure shove the others away. It shouted and shoved and came to my side, and I struggled to make out who it was.

"â€œ!" he spoke, yet I could not understand his words.

His face was becoming ever clearer, and I strained my eyes to reveal his true face.

"â€œ!" he spoke again.

His face finally gained clarity.

Dark hair.

Wrinkled cheeks.

Sullen eyes.

I closed my eyes and tried to slip away again, but Selene shoved me away.

Is this real?

"Jack," the man spoke, his voice clear. "Jack, stay with me."

No. I condemn you. I hate you. I loathe you.

"We need to talk," the man said in a panicked voice.

I finally slipped away.

I had no desire to talk to my father.

* * *

><p>*H:V*

31. Vanguard is over

Vanguard's over. I'm not going to finish it. Thank you for taking the time to enjoy the story thus far.

End
file.